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**NURTURING NAIVETE:
The Baby-sitters Club AS A HEGEMONIC TEXT**

by

Kim Thorpe

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of Communication Studies in
Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor**

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

NURTURING NAIVETE:

THE BABY-SITTERS CLUB AS A HEGEMONIC TEXT

This thesis presents a socialist feminist perspective on the ideology contained in Ann M. Martin's girls' fiction series, The Baby-sitters Club. An introduction to The Baby-sitters Club, and to the marketing process involved in series of its type, is followed by an overview of the development of the concepts of ideology and hegemony, with emphasis on Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall.

Zillah Eisenstein and Mary P. Ryan are the major sources for the socialist feminist concepts and background, but more contemporary viewpoints are also included. A separate section focusses on feminists--not necessarily socialists--who have done research on adult and teen romances and girls' mystery novels--e.g., Bobbie Ann Mason, Janice Radway, Linda Christian-Smith and Tania Modleski.

Through textual analysis of the feminist materialist vein, 50 Baby-sitters Club books are examined under the following themes--Female friendship and female rivalry, Family situations and older women, Gender relations, sex and romance, Work, play, pastimes and entertainment and Race and class. In each theme, the books include seemingly "progressive" elements, including girls in successful group enterprises, working women and a multi-racial set of characters. However, the theory of logical typing, with the elements of

contradiction and paradox, is used to identify the hegemonic structures in the books--hegemonic structures designed to help keep the system of capitalist patriarchy in place.

DEDICATION

To my family:

Hayden and Yvonne, my parents;
Paul and Shawn, my brothers;

An oasis
of
strength, inspiration,
laughter and love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the completion of this thesis. I now acknowledge them.

Leading the list are the members of my Thesis Committee. I am deeply indebted to my Chair, Dr. Kai Hildebrandt, for directing me to The Baby-sitters Club. I also thank him sincerely for his stimulating ideas and shrewd criticism; his constant support and reassurance; and, last but not least, for brightening many moments with his warm personality and extraordinary sense of humour.

I am grateful to my Second Reader, Professor Rhonda Hammer, for giving much-needed focus and structure to this thesis, for her meticulous editing, and for leading me to principal sources. My Third Reader, Dr. Barrie Ruth Straus, is thanked for her thoughtful comments and her contribution of a slightly different perspective.

I thank my fellow Communication Studies graduate students: Elaine Grodaes, for providing guidance and encouragement at various points in the process; Vasanth Louis and Valerie Scatamburlo, for their generosity in sharing useful material; Margaret Young, for being a wonderful friend, confidant, and source of computer (and other) knowledge; Amanda Hayne, Min Zheng, Anita Ninan and Lisa Chen for extending caring friendship; and all others for enriching the University experience.

The secretaries, Ann Gallant, Lina Beaudry and Sheila Labelle will be remembered. Their unstinting co-operation and cheerful encouragement made the University of Windsor a better place to be.

Special thanks go to two people, through whose courtesy I have a better understanding of my subject. I am grateful to Hersch Young for directing me to my principal source article on The Baby-sitters Club; and to Saskia Hildebrandt for the generous long-term loan of her Baby-sitters Club books.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Ann M. Martin's girls' fiction series, The Baby-sitters Club, is a recent phenomenon in popular children's books. More than 50 books have been published in the series since the first one appeared in 1986, and over 46 million copies have been sold (Carter, 1991, p. C11). The series has already spawned spin-offs and HBO television specials, and every kind of marketing tool has been used to further its success.

The concept for the Baby-sitters Club series is quite simple. Stoneybrook, Connecticut is the headquarters of the Baby-sitters Club, a business conceived and headed by Kristy, a bossy, practical tomboy who one day witnessed the difficulty that her mother was having in finding a baby-sitter. She thought that it would be a good idea to provide a group of baby-sitters all under one roof, so that parents could be assured immediately that a reliable sitter would be available.

Membership has altered slightly since the series began, but, in addition to Kristy, faithful readers would have been introduced at one point or another to Claudia, the creative, fashion-conscious Japanese-American Vice-President; Mary Anne, the shy, sensitive Secretary; Stacey, the stylish diabetic Treasurer from New York; Dawn, the individualistic Alternative Officer from California; and to the Junior Officers, Mallory, the Wanna Be (Older), and her best friend, Jessi, the budding

black ballerina. Associate members are Shannon, and Logan, Mary Anne's sometime boyfriend and the only male in the club.

In every book we share the Baby-sitters' adventures with their young clients. The charges may be regulars or they may be new. The baby-sitting adventure might be the main focus of the book, or it might complement, or cast a new light upon, the book's principal plot and message.

It is clear that the publishers of The Baby-sitters Club have sought, with these books, to improve upon trends set in earlier juvenile series. They have attempted to create a multi-cultural atmosphere--one member of the Baby-sitters Club is black, another is Japanese-American; they have blended romance with mystery and with problem-coping; they have focussed always on one particular group of girls for the sake of comfortable familiarity. Each story is told from the viewpoint of one of the female members of the club, so that over the span of the series, a multiplicity of voices--at least ostensibly--is heard.

In its marketing sophistication and in its handling of many serious issues which could affect a child in today's world--eg. divorce, racial prejudice, handicaps and chronic illness--The Baby-sitters Club appears to be very modern, progressive and liberating in its openness. The purpose of this study is to investigate by textual analysis whether the books do indeed provide a liberating message for their young female readers, or whether their progressiveness is only an

illusion--attractive packaging for outdated patriarchal ideology.

Taking a broad cultural studies approach, I shall be primarily informed by Gramsci's notions of ideology and hegemony in conducting a textual analysis of The Baby-sitters Club series. Is it a hegemonic text? Stuart Hall's writings on preferred, negotiated and oppositional¹ decoding, Nichols' thoughts on contradiction, Fiske's claims for resistance, and Zillah Eisenstein's theory of capitalist patriarchy will all be important to the analysis.

On the subject of textual analysis, I quote from Birch (1989):

There is no single text with a single meaning. Meaning is relative to ideology, and the way we classify a text as "working" in a particular way says a great deal about the ideologies we are practising--consciously or otherwise....The decisions you make about how you classify language are political ones that accord with the way you see, and wish others to see, the world. This political act is not something that should be swept under the carpet, it should be recognized for what it is--a crucial, necessary, and inescapable part of the interpretative process (p. 29).

In Chapter 4, I shall be offering a textual analysis of The Baby-sitters Club based on feminist materialism, and on my subjectivity. Roman, Christian-Smith & Ellsworth (1988) explain the feminist materialist position on popular culture:

... popular cultural forms matter for feminist materialist struggle because they are involved intimately in securing and producing the consent of women and men to particular hegemonic meanings for gender (...) and sexual difference...The struggle for girls and women, then (...), over the gendered meanings, representations, and ideologies...is

nothing less than a struggle to understand and hopefully transform the historical contradictions of becoming feminine...The process...involves not only the unequal gendered power relations between men and women, but also those of class, race, age, and sexual orientation (pp. 3-4).

Textual analysis is a very close blend of theory and method. Feminist materialism provided a focus for my analysis: I knew what to investigate in the Baby-sitters Club books. For example, I was looking for evidence that the books "are involved intimately in securing and producing the consent of" girls "to particular hegemonic meanings for gender"; that, in its representations and ideology, the series is reproducing the contradictions of femininity; and that the hegemonic viewpoint on class, race, age, and sexuality is reflected in The Baby-sitters Club.

A feminist materialist reading of a popular cultural phenomenon, such as offered in this thesis, could, when presented in a simplified form, enlighten a young girl being socialized into femininity. Concerned parents and educators would, however, have to do their part in explaining to the child, in her own language, that there are other realities beside the one which she considers "natural" for girls.

1.2 Inspiration for the Study

This study is, to a large extent, inspired by Janice A. Radway's (1984) Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature. Radway's study has received much acclaim, since it was the first to examine how the ordinary reader, as

opposed to the critic, engages with mass produced fiction. Taylor (1986) is one of those to pay tribute:

Janice Radway has documented the equivocal relationship of suburban women to the patriarchal culture that simultaneously promises and forbids pleasure, autonomy, and fulfillment. And if her inferential reach occasionally exceeds her empirical grasp, this is a small price to pay for her pioneering inroads into the ethnography of audiences...(p. 399).

I fully appreciate the value of audience ethnographies. However, considering the young age of the readers of The Babysitters Club, an independent theoretically informed textual analysis must be the first step before proceeding to interviews (see Appendix). Textual analysis is my main task in this thesis, but I respect and am grateful for both aspects of Radway's contribution.

Radway's study focusses mainly on the romance novels and their female devotees. Radway collected her data not only from the novels themselves, but also from a particular group of romance readers in Midwestern USA--the "Smithton readers", as she calls them, consisting mainly of middle-aged, middle-class mothers.

From her personal examination of the romance novels, and from her discussions with her readers, Radway reaches the conclusion that the very act of romance reading could constitute a resistance to patriarchal demands. Furthermore, she finds that the novels themselves contain certain themes which, because they touch upon the common experiences of women, lend themselves to oppositional decoding. Here is

Radway's own articulation of her hopes for oppositional decoding of romances:

...because I suspect a demand for real change in power relations will occur only if women also come to understand that their need for romances is a function of their dependent status as women and of their acceptance of marriage as the only route to fulfilment, I think we as feminists might help this change along by first learning to recognize that romance reading originates in very real dissatisfaction and embodies a valid, if limited, protest (p. 220).²

In making the above statement, Radway makes no allowances for the fact that there are romances being published for teenagers (cf. Christian-Smith (1988)), and that even in children's books--particularly the more popular ones--ideological foundations are being laid which the adult romances only serve to reinforce. This consideration could have led to a modification of Radway's statement that "romance reading originates in very real dissatisfaction" (p. 220). Early conditioning might also have contributed.

If early conditioning to romance reading does exist, if dissatisfaction with a woman's lot and with married life is not the prime reason for the addiction, then feminists will find it difficult to gain support for a change in the romance formula and for a change in the social structure through awakened consciousness in romance readers. Romance readers who have been bred on "happily ever after" stories would probably be unwilling to sacrifice the comfortable familiarity of such a formula. The argument of the feminists--that romance reading stems from women's dissatisfaction--would also

appear flawed. It would be necessary to dig deeper and show how women have been socialized into being romance readers in order to successfully challenge the patriarchal system. This study is meant to be a small step in that direction.

1.3 The Importance of the Study

The importance of exploring the role of popular children's books in furthering or challenging patriarchal ideology has already been discussed to a certain degree above. Feminists need to acknowledge these books as a traditional socializing force, which leads females to aspire to a conception of femininity which will keep them subordinate to males. To start the critique at the stage of the full-fledged romance novel is to start too late. Children do not forget the lessons of life which they learn in their formative years, and, as Richmond-Abbott (1983) notes, books are among the child's earliest and most authoritative sources of information on sex roles (pp. 126-127).

In recent years, much has been written about adult, teen and preteen romances--cf. Weibel (1977); Interracial Books for Children Bulletin (1981); Radway (1984); Jensen (1984); Christian-Smith (1988); Modleski (1990/1982); Gilbert & Taylor (1991); about soap operas--e.g., Brown (1989) and Modleski (1990/1982); about women's and teens' magazines--e.g., McRobbie (1978); Ferguson (1983); McMahon (1990); Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer & Hebron (1991);--and about other forms of

popular female entertainment; some attention has also been given to the popular girls' fiction series which cannot strictly be branded romances.

Even earlier, Bobbie Ann Mason (1975) produced a fascinating feminist study on The girl sleuth, in which she looked at The Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, The Outdoor Girls, Judy Bolton and other well-known and well-loved girls' mystery series. She noted that these books had been systematically ignored or dismissed, although popular culture had assumed new importance (p. x). Mason (1975) writes:

By applying critical tools to these books, we open new ground in a manner which I find doubly affirmative, for it gives the study of fiction a new relevance and, more importantly, it acknowledges significant textures of our real (if sometimes embarrassedly hidden) lives... the entire undertaking [of examining popular culture] is positive in that it helps us to discover who we really are--an essential prerequisite to deciding who we want to become (p. x).

The thought that the feminist Mason is expressing here is similar to that of British cultural studies, with its emphasis on the "natural", the "everyday" as a proper focus of critical study. The books examined by Mason appear to be harmless childhood entertainment, but are steeped in patriarchal ideology. One needs to realize that fact in order to change it. Yet, in spite of Mason's observations, hers remains one of the few feminist books available on popular girls' series. There is a definite need for an update, since The Baby-sitters Club, for example, has more elements of "progressiveness" than any series about which Mason has written.

In an article on The Baby-sitters Club, Margaret Mackey (1990) compares this series to others by Enid Blyton (The Secret Seven, the Famous Five, etc.) and Elsie J. Oxenham (The Abbey Girls). Mackey tries to pinpoint the appeal of the series books, and to identify some of the benefits. However, she is writing from the perspective of a former teacher, and as a student in Library and Information Science; therefore much of her interest is in the reading skills which the series books can help to develop, and the theory which she utilizes is related to reading. Although Mackey makes some useful general observations about The Baby-sitters Club series, she says nothing about its potential to support or challenge patriarchal ideology.

The same weakness can be found in Jenkins' (1992) study of cultural diversity in The Baby-sitters Club. It is Jenkins who quotes from Maura Demet's interview with Ann M. Martin in the Milwaukee Journal in which the latter states, "I hope that kids will learn something from every book. I think I'm trying to make a point in each book, but in a light-handed way" (p. 3). It is Jenkins who continues, "This comment, plus the evidence of the series' enormous popularity with young readers, invites a closer examination of the series and its messages" (p. 3). Nevertheless, this is Jenkins' (1992) cavalier final summation of the depiction of race and culture in The Baby-sitters Club:

...despite (or because of) the various problems in the treatment of Jessi and Claudia as non-majority

characters, they remain two of the more interesting and lively members of the Baby-sitters Club. The messages they embody are contradictory, but no more contradictory than the myriad racial and cultural assumptions present in contemporary U.S. society (p. 29).

This is a weak and disappointing conclusion considering the excellent insights which Jenkins has included in her paper. Theory is missing which could have transformed her work into something much more meaningful. It is this theory that I intend to include--theory which will highlight the capacity of the series to invite conformity, change or a certain amount of both.

The potential of The Baby-sitters Club to be an agent of conformity or change is all the more significant because of two factors. The books benefit from an impressive marketing campaign; and, as a consequence, the books enjoy immense success.

1.4 The Big Business Of The Baby-Sitters Club

As the books' advertising states, "It all started with Kristy's Great Idea", the big business that constitutes The Baby-sitters Club. The first book, Kristy's Great Idea, was copyrighted 1986. The series of girls' fiction, which targets girls aged 6-12 years, is published by Apple, a subsidiary of Scholastic Inc., and now includes over 50 books, not to mention spin-offs such as the Baby-sitters Little Sister series and television specials on HBO (Carter, 1991, C11, C16). There is an official fan club, and beach towel

giveaways, videos, diaries, calendars, games, dolls, bookmarks, T-shirts, and contests are among the many marketing tools already in use.

Such deliberate encouragement of consumerism is well in keeping with the trends of today's publishing world. Linda Christian-Smith (1988), who has done research in the area of adolescent romance, believes in "the importance of locating gender discourses constructed in popular cultural forms within their economic and political conditions of production" (p. 77). She notes that large-scale mergers of publishing companies in the 80s have caused profitability to assume the greatest importance, and that the existence of the teen romance series is partly in response to this need (Christian-Smith, 1988, p. 77).

Christian-Smith (1988) makes an observation, which proves essential to the central thesis of this study:

Of course, teen romances for girls are nothing new...What is new, however, is the transposing of adult romance formats from Harlequin Romances to young adult publishing. This is evident in the way that audiences are identified, in big-budget marketing campaigns, and in the use of the series format in which several books each month are issued (p. 78).

Christian-Smith (1988) points to Scholastic Books as the developer of the first teen romance series in the 1980s. Marketing research into Scholastic's own school bookclub, TAB, revealed that romances were immensely popular and resulted in Wildfire (p. 78). This pioneer of all teen romance series consisted of formula-produced books, all dealing with a high-

school girl and the development of her relationship with the boy of her dreams (Lanes, 1981, p. 5).

Significantly, Scholastic Inc., the developer of the first teen romance series, is also responsible for The Baby-sitters Club. This is not strictly a teen romance series, but, nevertheless, a series with elements of romance, and one which has received the benefit of strong marketing campaigns. The series format encourages brand-name loyalty, the desire to make a collection. Jensen (1984) connects this to the success of Harlequin romances (p. 32), and it certainly seems to be effective in the case of The Baby-sitters Club. Mackey (1990) writes:

Anyone involved in encouraging children to read would have found our neighborhood a cheering sight over the past months. Both in school and at home, there has been a ferment over the gradual acquisition of a particular collection of books... All this enthusiasm and book-oriented social activity revolves round one series: the Baby-sitters Club by Ann M. Martin (p. 484).

The fact that over 46 million copies of the books have been sold should prove that it is not only in Margaret Mackey's neighborhood that the Baby-sitters Club series is an obsession with young girls. The marketing of this series and others like it is another example of

...hard-sell aimed directly at children--further evidence that in book publishing today, it is not professional editors but the market analysts who call the shots (Romance series for young readers, 1981, p. 4).

In other words, publishing is run as a business much like any other. McNeal (1987) notes that 30 or 40 years ago,

children were not seen as part of the current market, but as savers and part of the future market. This started to change with the baby boom after World War II. Since the number of children had considerably increased, even the small spending done by those aged five to twelve became of some interest, however slight. In addition, there was increased spending by the individual child; these were fruitful years. However, no one worried about the statistics of this new phenomenon; it had not assumed enough importance in the eyes of the market analysts (McNeal, 1987, p. 5).

McNeal (1987) goes on to point out that today children's spending is considered very important, and that marketing analysts see children as not one market but three: current, future, and influential (on purchases made by their parents). McNeal's (1987) observations concerning children as a future market have particular bearing on this study:

...businesses are in business for the long haul...It is logical, then, for many of them to practice "growing" customers. Thus, in addition to viewing children as current customers,... [they]... may be equally interested in children as future consumers among whom brand awareness and preferences can be created now so that they will be consumers of these products when they become teenagers and adults (p. 5).

It is not too difficult to imagine fans of The Babysitters Club moving on to a teen romance series like Scholastic's Wildfire and eventually to Harlequins or some other type of romance. Mariam Frenier, history professor at the University of Minnesota, describes series like

Scholastic's Wildfire as "training bras for future Harlequin readers" (cited in Romance series for young readers, 1981, p. 31). It is therefore important to see these girls as consumers in a double sense--of economics and of ideology.

The Baby-sitters Club books target girls specifically. This proved to be a disadvantage when Scholastic was trying to interest a television network in producing a series based on the books. The phenomenal success of The Baby-sitters Club was worth little in the view of the television producers, since the books' public was largely female. The television producers knew that it is easier to persuade a girl to watch a boys' programme than vice versa (Carter, 1991, p. C11). This is evidence of the early indoctrination of children into the patriarchal value system, which ascribes prestige to the male and scorns everything linked to the female (Dobson Grey, 1982, p. 19).

In the next chapter, the concepts of ideology and hegemony will be established as vital to the examination of The Baby-sitters Club. The evolution of the concept of ideology will be sketched from its origins to Marx, then through Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, the British Cultural Studies group, to John Fiske. Hegemony and its various shades of meaning will, in view of their importance, be handled separately. Stuart Hall of the British Cultural Studies tradition will be highlighted as the central theorist on ideology for this thesis, and, along with hegemony, the theory

of logical typing, with the elements of contradiction and paradox, will be treated as a central concept.

In the third chapter, the focus will be on the feminist contribution. Eisenstein's (1979) vision of the workings of capitalist patriarchy will be presented, along with the views of some more contemporary Marxist feminists. Ryan's (1979) definition of femininity and her portrayal of its place in the capitalist patriarchal system will lay the groundwork for a discussion of some feminists--not necessarily socialists--who have conducted studies on adult and adolescent romances and girl mystery stories.

In the fourth chapter, there will be a textual analysis of The Baby-sitters Club built around five themes:

- i) Female friendship and female rivalry.
- ii) Family situations and older women.
- iii) Gender relations, sex and romance.
- iv) Work, play, pastimes and entertainment.
- v) Race and class.

The theoretical framework, outlined in the second and third chapter, will be used to establish a pattern running through all the themes--a pattern which is indicative of the hegemonic order.

In the conclusion, there will be a brief summary of the first three chapters of the thesis. The most significant findings of the textual analysis will then be discussed in

relation to the theoretical framework. Suggestions for further research will be given.

CHAPTER TWO

IDEOLOGY AND HEGEMONY--THE THEORY

2.1 Introduction

"Ideology" is a concept central to this study of The Baby-sitters Club, but the concept is not without its complications. Larrain (1979) writes:

Ideology is perhaps one of the most equivocal and elusive concepts one can find in the social sciences; not only because of the variety of theoretical approaches which assign different meanings and functions to it, but also because it is a concept heavily charged with political connotations and widely used in everyday life with the most diverse significations (p. 13).

Not all facets of ideology and of the theories of ideology can be covered in this thesis. It is the intention here to briefly trace the development of the concept of ideology from its origins to Marx, then through other theorists--principally Gramsci, Hall and Nichols--whose thoughts are of relevance to this paper.

2.2 The Origin of Ideology

The invention of the word "ideology" is generally attributed to Antoine Destutt de Tracy, a French philosopher, who apparently used it in 1796 to designate a doctrine of ideas (Carlsnaes, 1981, p. 24). Carlsnaes (1981) explains further:

...the term or designation "ideologie", and with it the "ideologues"--the eminent groups of savants and philosophes which formed itself around Destutt in the newly created Institut de France (established in 1795)--became identified with an optimistic

philosophical doctrine or set of beliefs which can be loosely characterized as rationalistic, naturalistic, reductionist, antimetaphysical, and generally "scientific" in nature (p. 25).

The ideologues believed that their philosophical doctrine could lead them to the point of creating a program for radical societal change (Carlsnaes, 1981, pp. 26-27). For this reason, they soon became known for their "pedagogic zeal" (Carlsnaes, 1981, p. 27). In fact, it was on account of this pedagogic zeal that the word "ideologie" entered the French language, and from the beginning had a negative connotation. Napoleon was responsible for this. Having lost the support of the ideologues, the historic figure retaliated by pouring public contempt upon them. He even blamed them and their ideas for his military defeat in Russia (Carlsnaes, 1981, p. 27).

2.3 The Marxian Conception of Ideology

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was opposed to the Enlightenment principles which inspired the ideologues. and this was the basis for his attack on ideology (Carlsnaes, 1981, p. 30). As Williams (1977) states, the original conception of ideology

...was limited, by its philosophical assumptions, to a version of ideas as "transformed sensations" and to a version of language as a "system of signs"(...). These limitations, with their characteristic abstraction of "man" and "the world", and with their reliance on the passive "reception" and "systematic association" of "sensations" were not only "scientific" and "empirical" but were elements of a basically bourgeois view of existence (p. 57).

This bourgeois view of existence was linked to an optimistic, ahistorical view of society. Not surprisingly, Marx noted contradictions in the capitalist society for which the ideologues, including those in Germany, could not account.

They believe the chains of men are illusions of consciousness and not material relations. By combatting phrases they hide the real chains, the real contradictions which arise in practical life (Larrain, 1979, p. 47).

In contrast, Marx was committed to uncovering the material reality of social relations and to exposing the contradictions therein. Indeed, Larrain (1979) considers this to be an important part of Marx's legacy: to have revealed the link between ideology and the contradictions intrinsic to capitalist society, thus making that society's precarious position and its historical relativity also a comprehensible fact (p. 34).

For Marx, ideology was a negative concept, with two related characteristics: the concealment of societal contradictions and the support for continued rule by the dominant class (Larrain, 1979, p. 48). Larrain (1979) outlines this view:

...ideology serves the interests of the ruling class, which can display the present order of things as natural and in the interest of all sections of society. Ideology serves the interests of the dominant class not because it has been produced by the ideologists of the class - which may or may not be the case--but because the concealment of contradictions objectively works in favour of the dominant class's interests (p. 61).

According to Kinloch (1981), "ideologies", as conceived by Marx, "masked the societal context of ideas, making consciousness passive and uncritical, creating social blindness and determinism" (p. 5). This seems to be an amplification of the statements above: ideology creates the impression that the present society functions in the only way that it possibly could; that there is no historical relativity to its existence and therefore no point in trying to effect any kind of social change. In effect, like Voltaire's Pangloss, ideology tells us that this is "the best of all possible worlds" (Voltaire, 1975, p. 22).

2.4 Antonio Gramsci

Marxism virtually took over the term "ideology" as its own. However, there are many different versions of Marxism, and just as many Marxist versions of "ideology". Larrain (1983) writes:

...there is no single Marxist conception of ideology or agreement as to which version should be considered the properly Marxist one...A glance at the various studies on the subject will immediately reveal not only an enormous variety of viewpoints, but also the fact that ideology seems to be considered a privileged terrain of struggle between different interpretations of Marx (p. 1).

For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in the view of the Italian Socialist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and of his followers.

Gramsci proves central to this study, primarily due to his writings on the notion of "hegemony". Before examining

this concept, however, Gramsci's view of "ideology" must first be addressed. His life and his death represent a sacrifice in the struggle between two ideologies: Fascism and Socialism.

Gramsci radically dissociated himself from Marx's negative view of ideology. Larrain (1979) sums up Gramsci's conception succinctly:

For him ideology is a superstructural expression of a contradictory reality, an expression of the "kingdom of necessity" which embraces every class in society (p. 80).

Larrain notes that Gramsci made a distinction between two concepts of ideology--ideology as historically necessary to support a given structure, and ideology as arbitrary. Gramsci believed in the former concept, seeing ideology in a positive light as the world-view of a class, as the "cement" which unifies a social bloc (Larrain, 1979, p. 81).

This provided a major contribution to the evolution of Gramsci's theory of ideology--his vision of ideology as having a material nature instead of simply a spiritual reality. Also new was the idea that ideology was developed and spread by a material and institutional structure of apparatuses, such as schools, churches, and, importantly, all media, and that subjectivity was in fact socially determined through ideology. As Mouffe (1981) points out, these ideas would later be substantially developed by the famous Marxist "structuralist", Louis Althusser (1918-), but were first implicit in Gramsci's thought (pp. 226-227).

Gramsci moved beyond classical Marxism in paying attention to the numerous cultural manifestations of ideology (Adamson, 1980, pp. 175-176). Williams (1977) elaborates:

Gramsci made a distinction between "rule" (dominio) and "hegemony". "Rule" is expressed in directly political forms and in times of crisis by direct or effective coercion. But the more normal situation is a complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces, and "hegemony",..., is either this or the active social and cultural forces which are its necessary elements. Whatever the implications of the concept for Marxist political theory (...), the effects on cultural theory are immediate (p. 108).

Hegemony will later be examined in greater detail as a concept of extreme importance to this paper. The link established by Gramsci between culture and ideology is, however, equally significant, since we are examining The Babysitters Club as a cultural artefact containing traces of patriarchal ideology.

Since Gramsci was a Marxist, it is not surprising that he considered Marxism superior to all other ideologies. In his eyes, other ideologies have been "manifestations", but not conscious expressions, of society's contradictions; Marxism is the most conscious expression of these contradictions. Other ideologies, in their attempts to reconcile opposing interests, become themselves contradictory; Marxism does not seek reconciliation--it is the "theory of...contradictions" (Larrain, 1979, pp. 81-82).

2.5 The Frankfurt School - Ideology and Mass Culture

Kellner (1989) points out that the Frankfurt School, more appropriately known as the Institute for Social Research, was "among the first to apply the Marxian method of ideology critique to the products of mass culture" (p. 123). Thoughts on mass culture are particularly important for our purposes since The Baby-sitters Club, as a formulaic girls series, is arguably a mass cultural phenomenon.

The Institute, founded in 1923, was the first of its kind with Marxist leanings in Germany, and included among its members T. W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Henryk Grossmann and Arkadij Gurland. Walter Benjamin is described by Held (1980) as a member of "the outer circle" of the Institute (p. 14).

Adorno and Horkheimer eventually replaced the term "mass culture" with "the culture industry", in order to remove any notion that the culture of which they were speaking was genuine and arose spontaneously from the masses (Held, 1980, pp. 90-91). Kellner (1989) appreciates the cynicism in the substituted term:

The term "culture industry"... contains a dialectical irony typical of the style of Critical Theory: culture, as traditionally valorized, is supposed to be opposed to industry and expressive of individual creativity while providing a repository of humanizing values. In the culture industries, by contrast, culture has come to function as a mode of ideological domination, rather than of humanization or emancipation (p. 131).

As conceived by the Frankfurt School and its followers, the products of the culture industry give the appearance of being unique but are really part of a formula. They frame reality for their consumers in a way compatible with the dominant ideology. These products also present the illusion of harmonious relationship between the individual and society, by linking the personal to the social (Held, 1980, p. 94). These are flaws which can be found in The Baby-sitters Club, as will be highlighted in my analysis of the text.

The Frankfurt School perceived the recipient of the messages of the culture industry as quite unresistant, easily manipulated. Indeed, according to Kellner (1989), the Frankfurt School considered that mass culture, by reproducing the status quo, "helped reproduce personality structures which would accept the world as it is" (pp. 128-129).

The Frankfurt School's criticism of mass culture was almost always in correlation to its praise for high culture or "autonomous art" (Held, 1980, p. 94). The members of the Institute conceptualized high culture as "at least a potential force of enlightenment and emancipation" (Kellner, 1989, p. 129). Their lauding of the high culture, coupled with their contempt for the mass variety, earned Institute members the label "elitist".

The Frankfurt School's stand is of interest to the discussion of the girls fiction series, The Baby-sitters Club, because, as an example of popular culture, the series would

have earned the contempt of the School's members. In my analysis of the books, I hope to discover whether there might be some emancipatory potential within them, such as the Frankfurt School only expected of high culture.

Here it should be noted that Walter Benjamin, a marginalized member of the group, was at odds with his colleagues on the subject of mass culture. As Bottomore (1984) states,

Benjamin considered that "mechanical reproduction" had revolutionary implications inasmuch as it tended to destroy the elitist "aura" of art and led to a "tremendous shattering of tradition" (p. 19).

Benjamin's view is worth pondering. The debate continues whether the process of democratization, which he sees mass culture to represent, carries much weight when measured against the potential for the wider propagation of ideology, furthering the interests of the ruling class.

As Berman (1989) points out, the "emphatic notion of criticism, with its concatenation of inquiries into aesthetic culture with questions of societal power, is a central feature of the legacy of the Frankfurt School" (p. 9). I hope that this legacy is reflected in my thesis.

2.6 British Cultural Studies

The Frankfurt School's elitist attitude towards "mass culture" was mirrored in Great Britain in the "culture and civilization" tradition. This seemed to all concerned to be a perfectly acceptable point of view, since all those

expressing it came from a similar class background; the pre-war restrictions on higher education ensured this (Turner, 1990, p. 44).

However, after the war, there was a democratization of adult education, and among those admitted to university on scholarship were a great number from working-class and lower middle-class families. Mass culture therefore had a strong impact on these students personal lives. From then on, that is, from the 50s and 60s, there was, in the British cultural studies tradition, a change in tone, as researchers sought to understand rather than to deride the phenomenon of mass culture (Turner, 1990, p. 44).

From 1964, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was the site of much of this new activity. Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and other members held the belief that the ordinary and the everyday were especially important study materials, since they are

...those aspects of our lives that exert so powerful and unquestioned an influence on our existence that we take them for granted. The processes that make us--as individuals, as citizens, as members of a particular class, race, or gender--are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible (Turner, 1990, p. 2).

Cultural studies evades precise definition, and this is its purpose. It is a means of eliminating divisions, such as the one between high culture and low culture, observed so

rigidly by the Frankfurt School. Cultural studies also floats easily between academic disciplines and epistemologies, which can result in a multi-dimensional picture of the relations under study. In this thesis, textual analysis within a Marxist feminist framework is therefore more than appropriate for a cultural studies approach.

As previously cited, the feminist Bobbie Ann Mason (1975) states that a critical look at popular culture--for example, children's series--will serve to acknowledge "significant textures of our real (if sometimes embarrassedly hidden) lives" (p. x), which will in turn lead us to decide what we really want to become. This is the aim of British cultural studies--to put the "taken for granted" under the microscope in order to reveal the history and the struggle which have necessitated its existence. This is the first step before showing how the system can be subverted to produce social change.

2.7 Fiske and US Cultural Studies

Theorists such as Douglas Kellner (1991) argue that much of cultural studies' critical edge was lost in its trip across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States (p. 4). On this side of the world, the argument is that culture for the masses is also of the masses--popular culture--and should be celebrated as such. Perhaps the most adamant proponent of this argument

is John Fiske, a transplanted (via Australia) British cultural studies scholar.

Fiske makes the subordinated people the subjects, rather than the objects, of the action involved in making popular culture. He concedes that the media are hegemonic; that they are structured in such a way that they represent and support the interests of the dominant class (Fiske, 1989, p. 2). However, he goes on to say:

There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and are not those preferred by the dominant ideology. The victories, however fleeting or limited, in this struggle produce popular pleasure, for popular pleasure is always social and political (Fiske, 1989, p. 2).

The phrase "however fleeting or limited" has been included rather casually by Fiske in his discussion of triumphs in the struggle of popular culture. However, this is the crux of the issue which can be--and often is--taken with Fiske's position. The triumphs which he awards are transitory at best. To consume a product of the culture industry and to give it a different interpretation might be empowering at the time, but it does not constitute resistance unless it is an overt political act involving an oppositional, i.e., counter-hegemonic, agenda.

2.8 Hall, Hegemony and Some Related Concepts

Having introduced some of the theories regarding ideology and mass culture, I would now like to turn attention to concepts central to this paper. Principal among these is Gramsci's hegemony, which, because of its all-encompassing nature, could not but influence the work of my central theorist Stuart Hall. Hegemony is also the framework within which logical typing, with contradictions and paradox, present oppositional issues in such a way that they then appear to be resolved without the need for social change. It is this structure against which Marxists believe resistance must be mounted.

2.8.1 Hegemony.

As Adamson (1980) points out, Gramsci, who introduced the concept, had two different notions concerning hegemony. The less common interpretation relates to a historical phase of capitalist development, on a higher level than the economic-corporative. I am less concerned with this aspect of his definition. Rather, my interest lies with that part which addresses hegemony as the means of getting the society to consent to the rule of the dominant class, without coercion (p. 10). Gramsci believed that only weak states needed to use coercion to ensure their domination; strong states would use hegemony (Adamson, 1980, p. 170)

Gramsci gave credit for the idea of "hegemony" to Lenin, but at its most evolved state, it is definitively Gramscian. Pellicani (1976) contrasts the thought of Lenin and Gramsci in this regard: "whereas Lenin theorized the conquest of society through the violent conquest of the state, Gramsci proposed the inverse procedure: the conquest of the state through the cultural occupation of society" (p. 4).

Williams (1977), from cultural studies, sees the concept of hegemony as at the same time encompassing and surpassing the older ones of "culture" and "ideology" (p. 108). As Cocks (1989) observes, Williams himself defines "hegemonic forms" as

the thoughts and practices that reproduce the dominance in society of a particular class and the dominance in culture of that class's (sic) particular ethos, without being purposefully designed by that class and inflicted by it on its powerless subordinates (p. 47).

"Hegemonic forms" are what pass as common sense. The dominant class is as much subject to them as the subordinate class, although the dominant class receives more benefit from them. Likewise, the subordinate class is as likely to uphold the "truth" of the hegemonic forms as the dominant. That does not mean that the subordinate class and the dominant class have the same hegemonic interests; nor does it mean that the subordinate class is only capable of supporting the present hegemonic system. The point is simply to show that the subordinate class is not only passive and powerless in the face of a hegemonic order; it can also enthusiastically participate in the maintenance of that order (Cocks 1989, p.

47). It could, however, be argued that to make such a differentiation is to be guilty of casuistry: active, enthusiastic participation by members of the subordinate class is due to hegemonic forms which control their thought patterns, and against which they are powerless.

Here is another explanation of the workings of the hegemonic cultural order, an explanation which has particular significance to this thesis:

A hegemonic cultural order tries to frame all competing definitions of the world within its range. It provides the horizon of thought and action within which conflicts are fought through, appropriated (ie. experienced), obscured (ie. concealed as a "national interest" which should unite all conflicting parties) or contained (ie. settled to the profit of the ruling class). A hegemonic order prescribes, not the specific content of ideas, but the limits within which ideas and conflicts move and are resolved (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1981, pp. 59-60).

I think that a useful metaphor for hegemony is that of a flexible frame, and this influences my feelings about my study. I must consider whether The Baby-sitters Club is truly a progressive series for girls. In this series, working mothers, broken families and minorities are featured in a sympathetic light. However, I believe that it is only a matter of setting new and wider measurements for the frame, so that hegemony can be maintained.

Clarke et al.'s (1981) description appears to be of a hegemonic order operating through transformism, through absorption. In such a situation, the masses are under the sway of the dominant class, which appears to deal with the issues

of other groups of people. This is, however, only a smokescreen; the issues are presented only in such a way that they lose their importance and the likelihood of revolution is lessened. Yet, the quote also confirms that the hold of hegemony is never complete; there are always leaks. As Clarke et al. (1981) illustrate, the "dominant classes retain power, but their 'repertoire' of control is progressively challenged, weakened, exhausted" (p. 61) by various forms of oppositional (counter-hegemonic) politics and culture.

Gramsci does offer an alternate scenario, in which opposing interests are genuinely considered and furthered by the dominant class. This is successful, or expansive, hegemony, through which all of society benefits (Mouffe, 1981, p. 223).

As Mouffe (1981) summarizes:

...if hegemony is defined as the ability of one class to articulate the interest of other social groups to its own, it is now possible to see that this can be done in two very different ways: the interests of these groups can either be articulated so as to neutralise them and hence to prevent the development of their own specific demands, or else they can be articulated in such a way as to promote their full development leading to the final resolution of the contradictions which they express (p. 224).

At present, the latter of the two versions of hegemony mentioned in the above quote seems to reside more in theory than in practice, at least in North America. I shall show that in The Baby-sitters Club, an artefact of America's hegemonic culture, there is an outward attempt to promote

minority interests by their representation. The problems of these minority groups are then articulated in such a way that they are sanitized, trivialized or reduced to a personal, rather than a social, level. They are, in effect, neutralized.

2.8.2 Stuart Hall's contribution.

Hegemony is an important concept for the British cultural theorist whose work will be central to this thesis. Stuart Hall was one of the early members of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which became a part of the University of Birmingham in 1964 and soon established itself as "the key institution in the field" (Turner, 1990, p. 76). Hall became the Centre's second director in 1969.

Although other parts of his work will be cited, I focus, for the purposes of this thesis, primarily on Stuart Hall's (1980) article "Encoding/Decoding". Davies (1991) lavishes praise on Hall for this piece:

Stuart Hall's great achievement was to teach a whole generation of students how to read politically. His article, "Encoding/Decoding", ostensibly a piece about television, (and apart from a number of serious counter-critiques) was perhaps the most important guide to any student, anywhere, on how to interpret the material at hand, encompassing a Marxist theory of production, a structuralist theory of the text, and a phenomenological sense of knowing (p. 339).

Hall (1980) introduces us to the concepts of "dominant" ("preferred"), "negotiated" and "oppositional" readings, so useful for a discussion of how patriarchal or any kind of

ideology in mass media is encoded and decoded. Hall (1982) believes that the media work to shape an "ideological environment", that is,

a way of representing the order of things which endowed its limited perspectives with that natural or divine inevitability which makes it appear universal, natural and coterminous with "reality" itself (p. 65).

He defines "dominant readings" as those which "have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized" (p. 134). If receivers decode the message approximately as encoded, then they are "operating within the dominant code" (p. 136). If they understand and accept the dominant message, but adapt it, as necessary, to their individual circumstance, then they are decoding "within the negotiated version" (p. 137). If they understand the total implications of the message, yet choose to decode it in a way not "preferred", then they are operating within "an oppositional code" (p. 38).

The ideal of any media producer is, as Hall (1980) says, "perfectly transparent communication" (p. 135). The meanings which producers would wish transferred to their audiences are generally the dominant or preferred. However, as Hall (1979) observes, even when the decodings are not "preferred", they are much more likely to be "negotiated" rather than "oppositional". The existence of "negotiated" decodings allows for a wide range of interpretations to be made, but all of which ultimately fall within the hegemonic frame (p. 344-

345). Hall (1979) expresses this well in stating that "negotiated" decodings

allow wide "exceptions" to be made in terms of the way the audience situates itself within the hegemonic field of ideologies, but...also legitimate the wider reach, the inclusive reference, the greater overall coherence of the dominant encodings (pp. 344-345).

"Negotiated" decodings have their basis in what Hall (1979) calls "the structured complementarity of classes". This refers to the leeway given within the hegemonic codes so that "spaces" exist to accommodate both the dominant and subordinate classes (p. 345).

Hall (1979) explains the utility of these negotiated spaces:

Since the media not only are widely and diffusely distributed throughout the classes, but bring them within the grid of social communication, and must continually reproduce their own popular legitimacy for commanding that ideological territory, these negotiated spaces and inflexions...are absolutely pivotal to media legitimacy, and give that legitimacy a popular basis (p. 345).

This would be compatible with Dow's (1990) observations in relation to television in particular. I believe that her comments are pertinent to the discussion of other mass media as well:

So, for instance, the demands made for increased minority and female representation result in higher visibility for these groups on television, although the situations and characters through which they are depicted may implicitly work to "contain" the more radical aspects of the changes such representation implies...The medium adjusts to social change in a manner that simultaneously contradicts or undercuts a progressive premise (p. 263).

Dow is saying that television concedes to popular demand and changing times by giving women and minorities a higher profile. This is to establish the medium's popular legitimacy. At the same time, however, in the discourse of the medium, the hegemonic codes always apply. Negotiated readings, as we have previously noted, are the hegemonic order's preference to the radical change which could result from oppositional decoding. Hall (1980) comments:

One of the most significant political moments (...) is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the "politics of signification"--the struggle in discourse--is joined (p. 138).

An oppositional reading is, almost by definition, counter-hegemonic. She or he who oppositionally decodes must be very well developed critically in order to understand the structures lying behind the overt content of a hegemonic text, and to step outside of them. To be able to take this text apart and then reconstitute it in accordance with a counter-hegemonic agenda is, indeed, to make an authentic political move.

Hall's theory informed my methodology. In the textual analysis, it was helpful to know that supposedly "oppositional" representations may have only been included in The Baby-sitters Club to widen the reach of the hegemonic code. I asked the question: Has the text not been deliberately designed to be decoded in a negotiated manner?

If this is so, then, in a seeming contradiction, a "negotiated" reading is a "preferred" one.

2.8.3 Logical typing, contradiction and paradox

This is the point where Marxist cultural criticism meets communications theory. The major source for this section is Bill Nichols (1981), author of Ideology and the image: Social representation in the cinema and other media. He uses a semiotic-Marxist approach. His own articulated view of ideology is not new, but noteworthy because of its simplicity:

Ideology is how the existing ensemble of social relations represents itself to individuals; it is the image a society gives of itself in order to perpetuate itself. These representations serve to constrain us (necessarily); they establish fixed places for us to occupy that work to guarantee coherent social actions over time. Ideology uses the fabrication of images and the processes of representation to persuade us that how things are is how they ought to be and that the place provided for us is the place we ought to have (p. 1).

This definition relates directly to my study. It is possible to substitute or simply understand "women" wherever "us" or "we" is used, and take "the fabrication of images and the processes of representation" to mean those to be presented in The Baby-sitters Club.

The phenomena which affect these processes of representation are as follows: confusion of logical typing; contradiction; and paradox. Logical typing refers to the hierarchical structure of information, involving proper levels of generalization (Nichols, 1981, p. 72). Here is an example

from The Baby-sitters Club. Dawn, the California girl, is narrating. She and Jessi have left the almost all-white Stoneybrook to visit their old neighbourhoods:

Then, of course, Jessi's postcard...I never thought of it before, but she and I really were in very similar situations. Of course, Jessi went back to a neighborhood where everyone is black and I went back to one where everyone is ...well, blond.

Dawn on the coast, (1989), p.119.

"Black" and "blond" are not at the same level of generalization. To attempt to make them so is to try to make centuries of oppression disappear, to make skin colour and hair colour of as little importance. Dawn leaves Stoneybrook, an almost all-white neighborhood to go to an all-white ("blond") neighborhood. She can feel comfortable in either. Jessi leaves an almost all-white neighborhood, where her family was first shunned, to go to an all-black neighborhood. Are they really in very similar situations? This example shows a confusion of logical types.

Confusion of logical typing also includes the confusion between the general and the particular, the class and the member. This leads to stereotyping, also an important notion. "Geniuses have no friends"; "all black people have rhythm" would be examples.

Nichols (1981) notes:

Though logic demands that strict separation be maintained between levels, most communication, including narrative, fails to keep them separate...in narrative and exposition confusion of logical types appears to be a central facet of their aesthetic effect and is related to recognition (p. 73).

Recognition is in turn related to ideology. As Nichols (1981) points out, recognition aids in shaping and confirming one's world-view. This usually is not entirely a "natural" process, but one guided along by ideology (p. 39). This notion of recognition, coupled as it is with logical typing, will be very important to my search for ideology in The Babysitters Club, especially in relation to the depiction of minority groups in the series.

Contradiction is also fundamental to the Marxist notion of ideology. Larrain (1979) gives an excellent definition:

The concept of contradiction is one of the most difficult and slippery in Marx's thought. It is never carefully defined, though it is profusely used in various contexts...In very general and simple words one can say that contradiction refers to the development of social phenomena as a movement of opposite tendencies which, in spite of being mutually interdependent, are also mutually exclusive and struggle with each other (p. 218).

The flaw in every ideology is the failure to account for contradictions in society. I have already noted Gramsci's belief that all ideologies, except Marxism, tend to become contradictory in their attempts to deal with contradictions (Larrain, 1979, pp. 81-82).

Narrative generally tries to resolve contradictions, either by explaining them away or by showing how they might be overcome (Nichols, 1981, p. 76). In narrative the contradiction is normally expressed as a paradox, which appears, finally, to be resolved through narrative closure:

Narrative closure generally exhibits congruence with the resolution of paradox. The congruence

heightens the sense of unity and coherence, while the concept of coherence, closure, is itself contradictorily coherent. Something exceeds it, is left over; paradox remains, finally, irresolvable...(Nichols, 1981, p. 103).

Sleight-of-hand produces the appearance of closure, of resolution, in narrative. This can be done in one of two ways: by taking an apparent problem of logical typing and revealing it to be so only within a certain frame of reference; or by arranging for a "deus ex machina" to bring a happy end for all (Nichols, 1981, p. 102). Behind the illusion, the real problem remains hidden and virtually untouched.

In this example from The Baby-sitters Club there does not even seem to be an attempt to resolve the paradox. In Mallory and the Trouble with Twins (Martin, 1989i), the message appears to be: we must strive for individuality; we express our individuality by conforming. The story centres on Mallory, a Junior Officer of the Baby-sitters Club, who realizes that her charges, twins, are very unhappy because no one acknowledges them as individuals, only as a interchangeable pair. Having brought this to the attention of the twins' mother, Mallory is allowed to take them out to shop for clothes of their own choice.

Mallory would appear well aware of the importance of being an individual, which in this case includes expressing individuality through dress. However, she spends much of her time in the book wishing that she could dress like someone

else. Here Mallory is the fictional narrator, and she is speaking first about Mary Anne's outfit:

The neat thing about her outfit was that she was wearing white suspenders with her skirt. I immediately decided to use some of my hard-earned Arnold money to buy suspenders. And maybe a pair of push-down socks like Claud's. Or, if I became rich, to copy Dawn Schafer's entire outfit (p. 59).

She also buys two pairs of identical earrings for Jessie, her best friend, and herself. "Best friends, I thought, should have matching earrings" (p. 120).

One possible interpretation of the story is this: If one is secure in one's sisterhood with another, there is no need to dress alike (indeed, the desire may be stronger to dress differently); however, creating a sisterhood not based on blood may utilize external conformity. Yet one would think that a sisterhood that encourages conformity might not lead to liberation but to a new form of tyranny.

Nichols (1981) admits that narrative, with the enjoyment it affords, serves to lessen the impact of existing social contradictions; however, he does also point out narrative's usefulness in putting a finger on these contradictions. Narratives therefore have the potential to be linked to both conformity and resistance (p. 103).

2.8.4 Resistance

My understanding of resistance should be clarified here. It has been shown that John Fiske and his followers find potential for resistance in just about every popular cultural

phenomenon. My view is not so optimistic. Inspired by Hall, I make a distinction between "negotiation" and "resistance".

Negotiation in lifestyle would be a negotiated reading put into practice. Within the system there are contradictions; one who practices negotiation moves within the broad framework of the system, but according to circumstance, may, on an individual level, decide to break some of the rules without becoming an outcast.

Resistance, in contrast, is, as Ganguly (1991) says, an "explicitly political act" which involves "disarticulating sedimented meanings from their original contexts, and articulating them in an oppositional agenda" (p. 138). This definition of resistance is in keeping with Hall's views; moreover, the qualifications "explicitly political act" and "oppositional agenda" seem to exclude the interaction between many enthusiasts and their form of popular culture. I am thinking particularly of romance fans and soap opera fans, who seem to escape to these forms of entertainment to gather strength to face their own world once more. They might obtain a form of empowerment, but I do not consider that they are engaged in resistance. I also would not expect to find the criteria for resistance met by the young fans of The Babysitters Club. Their age makes unlikely the knowledge and sophistication which are needed to decode oppositionally, especially with a view to mounting resistance.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FEMINIST CONTRIBUTION

3.1 Introduction

In this paper I will examine The Baby-sitters Club as a vessel for the ideology of capitalist patriarchy, and, further, explore whether there are spaces within the discourse of this series which allow for oppositional decoding. A socialist feminist approach will be used in order to incorporate the issues of race and class along with that of patriarchal domination.

3.2 The Socialist Feminist Perspective

The principal source for examining the dynamics of capitalist patriarchy will be Zillah R. Eisenstein, "the foremost proponent of dual systems theory"--the dual systems referring to capitalism and patriarchy (Philipson & Hansen, 1990, p. 18). According to Eisenstein (1979), patriarchy is defined by radical feminists as "a sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege". (p. 17). On the other hand, the socialists see the system of oppression as capitalism, and power as dependent upon class and ones relation to the means of commodity production (p. 8).

Eisenstein (1979) wants to see a synthesis of the theories. She emphasizes that capitalism and patriarchy have a "mutually reinforcing and dialectical relationship", which

must be understood if there is to be any hope of winning the battle against oppression (p. 5). She therefore proposes socialist feminism as a manner of analysis.

Eisenstein (1979) gives what she admits is an oversimplified explanation of the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy:

Capitalism uses patriarchy and patriarchy is defined by the needs of capital...patriarchy (as male supremacy) provides the sexual hierarchical ordering of society for political control and as a political system cannot be reduced to its economic structure; while capitalism as an economic class system driven by the pursuit of profit feeds off the patriarchal ordering. Together they form the political economy of society... (p. 28).

This simplified version is sufficient for the purposes of this paper, although Barrett (1988) points out an inconsistency--Eisenstein sees patriarchy as existing before capitalism, yet proceeds to write about it solely in terms of its functions for capital (p. 16). Nevertheless, the acknowledgment of the interlocking relationship between the political system of patriarchy and the economic system of capitalism is essential to a serious consideration of The Baby-sitters Club. The series has been very heavily marketed--a sure sign that economic concerns have come into play along with any political intent.

Eisenstein (1979) makes an important differentiation between "exploitation" and "oppression", concepts which were synonymous for Marx and Engels. In her eyes, "exploitation" is the more limited concept. It reflects the experience of

both sexes in the working class, who labour for the profit of the capitalist.

"Oppression" appears all-encompassing in comparison. It is applied to the plight of women and minorities, who must function in a society that is not only capitalist, but racist and patriarchal as well. It is related not only to women's position in the work-force, but also to their roles as mothers, housewives, and consumers and to their place in a racist society (pp. 22-23).

Eisenstein (1979) points out that patriarchal ideology does not reflect, in many respects, the reality of women's lives (p. 29). In terms of class, this is certainly true, because the majority of women receive their assignation based on their husband's relationship to the means of production; they are not assessed as individuals in their own right (p. 31). To address this problem, Eisenstein proposes a "multigrid conceptualization" to mirror "the complexity of sex and class differentials in the reality of women's life and experience" (p. 33). Along with the sex and class differentials, there is also race to explain why all women are oppressed, but some more oppressed than others.

Morgen (1990) notes that the duality of capitalism and patriarchy is not sufficient, in the eyes of black feminists, to explain the oppression of racism (p. 280). Indeed, Morgen considers this to be one of the major reasons that "dualistic thinking" has turned to "doubled thinking"-- a more holistic

approach, which regards the private and the public, sex, family and work, gender, class and race as all interconnected (pp. 279-280):

I believe that the historical shift from "dualist thinking" to "doubled vision" in socialist-feminist theory is indebted in large measure to the still fledgling incorporation of race--and to some extent ethnicity and culture--in theories of women's oppression and experience. Race upset the applecart, so to speak--those neat models that counterposed gender and class, patriarchy and capitalism. Dualist frameworks such as the public-private and "capitalist patriarchy" had to be re-examined, and socialist feminists began to take more seriously not only the gender-specific nature of class experience but the class-and race-specific experiences of gender (p. 280).

Women of all classes and races are oppressed by the patriarchal society's construction of femininity, although in different ways. A socialist feminist definition of "femininity" is provided by Ryan (1979): a social ideology which attributes certain human characteristics to women alone, thus creating a masculine/feminine split (p. 151).

The notion of femininity is also related to the entire socialization process through which females are initiated into their subordinate role. This notion is therefore not at all harmless, but rather insidious, as it is connected to the continuance of male power and prestige in society. Ryan (1979) stresses that femininity--and the patriarchal structure which it supports--evolves in union with society's current economic design, in this case capitalism (p. 151).

Although her analysis is not strictly from a socialist feminist perspective, Janet Radcliffe Edwards (1980) offers

some insight into the characteristics of femininity which both supports and expands Ryan's definition. Radcliffe Edwards notes that in fact there are two separate lists of these "feminine" characteristics (p. 124).

First, there are the supposedly inherent qualities of a woman. These are usually cast in negative form, like vanity and weakness. They provide justification for the inferior status of women (Radcliffe Edwards, 1980, p. 124). The others are the qualities which, in the eyes of patriarchy, women should strive to attain, like patience and devotion. A distinct--but not equal--sphere of activities has been created for women, in order to encourage the development of these virtues (Radcliffe Edwards, 1980, p. 124).

Radcliffe Edwards (1980) stresses that these virtues are "thought proper for women as opposed to men" (p. 124). Here is the crux of the matter. These virtues are positive in themselves but become a focus of feminist criticism because they are seen as only worthy of feminine striving, and because they provide an excuse for women's domestication. The concept of "femininity" will be important for our examination of The Baby-sitters Club and the role models which it presents for young girls.

In her article, Ryan (1979) focusses on "the relationship between femininity and capitalism during the early stages of American industrialization" (p. 152). Ryan (1979) believes that the feminine mystique began its development in America

during the nineteenth century, when women were geared to be a stabilizing force in the society during the turmoil of the early industrial period. She notes the role played by the publishing industry in effecting this. She writes:

Femininity was...put forth as a unique method of insuring social order...But if this peculiar method was to function well, masses of women had to be enrolled in a vast decentralized army. The recruitment campaign was conducted by a thriving publishing industry...The bulk of the profits for such publishers came from women's literature...The popular woman's literature of the nineteenth century was one point at which capitalist enterprise and femininity met (p. 156).

Ryan (1979) also points out that women wrote most of the domestic literature and thus played a large part in constructing the feminine mystique (p. 162): women often collaborate in their own oppression. In her renowned book The feminine mystique, which deals with the 1950s, Betty Friedan (1983) also gives a number of examples of women who personally enjoyed very full, exciting lives, yet lent their pens to the creation of a literary deluge which praised the role of a housewife (pp. 56-57).

Ryan (1979) still can see some beneficial aspects, however dubious or limited, of the "antebellum femirinity" promoted by the woman's literature she describes. The women felt that they were accorded respect and could gain their own type of power³. Confining themselves to their domain also seemed preferable to fighting for survival in a man's world. The women formed supportive relationships with each other. They also were given the opportunity of some diversion from

their claustrophobic existence (pp. 162-163). As Ryan (1979) says,

The very literature that inculcated femininity provided cathartic outlets for the tensions inherent in it...(p. 163).

The irony expressed in this quotation finds its echo in many other feminist writings. Some of these will be highlighted in the next section.

3.3 Other Feminists On Women's Literature

Radway (1984), Jensen (1984), and Modleski (1990/1982), although not necessarily socialist feminists, all agree that the reading of women's literature could be interpreted as a protest against the failure of patriarchal society, the lack of fulfilment in women's lives, and as a way of vicariously working through some of the problems which the system creates, for example, male violence and insensitivity. Examination of these and other feminist analyses of "feminine" literature will further contextualize my research.

Since the object of this study is The Baby-sitters Club, it may seem peculiar that the focus of this literature review will not be on studies of children's novels, but on studies of "feminine" literature. However, The Baby-sitters Club targets not children in general but girls specifically. It therefore must be seen as a potential tool for girls' socialization into femininity and is directly comparable to

adult women's and teen romances as well as girl mystery series such as Nancy Drew.

3.3.1 The duality in the romance...Janice A. Radway.

Radway (1984) contends that the romance novel provides a cathartic experience for its readers, as they see their social condition expressed through the pages. They can express anger at the insensitivity of the hero in the initial stages of the book--a distance and insensitivity which stem, according to Radway's feminist interpretation, from the engendering of the masculine sex towards aggression and an avoidance of attachments. They can deal vicariously with the threat of rape and other forms of male violence. Finally, Radway says, there is the romantic ending, which allows the reader to express

her opposition to the domination of commodity values in her society because she so heartily applauds the heroine's ability to draw the hero's attention away from the public world of money and status and to convince him of the primacy of her values and concerns (Radway, 1984, p. 214).

There is, however, a flip-side to these arguments. First of all, the insensitivity of the hero turns out to be just his feelings of love misread by the heroine. Secondly, in romance novels, rapes of the heroine by the hero stem from mistaken identity or from uncontrollable passion in the face of her beauty; they are not portrayed as deliberate acts of violence. The reader is therefore encouraged to rationalize male

violence instead of protesting against it (Radway, 1984, pp. 214, 216).

The romantic ending also has sinister undertones. As Radway (1984) explains, in the early stages of the romance tale women are presented as varied in their personalities and interests and as possessing freedom to pursue whatever course in life they choose. However, this variety and this freedom soon become a mirage, as the end of the romantic tale is inevitably the same for all (p. 208). This inevitable "romantic" ending has its not so romantic parallel in real life:

Paradoxically, the inexorability of the romances mythic conclusion might be said to reproduce the "real", not because all women actually find fulfilment in romantic love but because the conclusion's repeated overpowering of the heroine's individual difference by her enthusiastic assumption of an abstract, unvarying role parallels a situation that women find difficult to avoid in actuality (Radway, 1984, p. 208).

In sum, the romance novel, although it does have the potential for oppositional decoding, still supports the status quo, the patriarchal structure. It affirms that a woman can lessen the threat of rape, that she can experience independence, tenderness and love with her partner in marriage, if only she assumes responsibility for her personal situation. The larger social order remains unchallenged. In other words, hegemony is maintained.

3.3.2 The duality in the romance reader...Tania Modleski.

Tania Modleski (1990/1982), using the psychoanalytical approach, concludes that Harlequin type romances have a "hysterical" quality. (Hysteria here refers to a state in which the sufferer watches her own bizarre behaviour as if completely detached from it, and also in which she relives past experiences in the present.) Modleski thinks of the Gothic, a sinister romance, as a "paranoid text", incorporating phobias and persecution fears (pp. 32-33).

Modleski sees the basic insecurity and dissatisfaction in women's lives as reasons for the existence and success of both these types of books. She says:

Despite the significant differences, however, both texts share in common a sense of the insufficiency of female selfhood. The reader of Harlequin Romances finds herself, in "hysterical" fashion, desiring the subversion of the heroine's attempt at self-assertion; and the reader of Gothics identifies with a heroine who fears hereditary madness or who feels literally possessed by the spirits of other women from out of the past (p. 33).

In other words, the reader of Harlequin Romances enjoys identifying with the boldness of the heroine in the initial stages of the book, but she is equally pleased when the heroine gives up her independence to be with the hero in marriage by the end of the book. The heroine's fate, then, is no better than her own; the reader receives assurance that she has made the best and only realistic choice for her own life. In The Baby-sitters Club, the identification between the book's heroine and the reader will be strong, because the

narration is in first person, and it is a child speaking to a child.

Similarly, in the Gothic romances, the heroine fears that she will repeat the pattern of women before her, and she feels trapped. She does not know whether she can trust her husband, whom she both loves and fears. In the end, however, she is reconciled to her fate as a woman and as a wife, as the reader feels that she too must be. There is little hope of liberation through this perspective. In The Baby-sitters Club this restriction does not exist, at least overtly. As shall be shown in the textual analysis, there are a diversity of roles.

3.3.3 The secret of the romance's success and status...Margaret A. Jensen.

Margaret Ann Jensen (1984) has also looked at the romance, concentrating on the Harlequins (cf. Rabine, 1985, pp. 249-267). She finds that Harlequins are "ambiguous and contradictory, a fascinating combination of the realistic problems women face in our society and escapist solutions" (p. 18). Jensen (1984) attributes Harlequin's success to the perfect equilibrium maintained in the books between thrills and cosiness and between the depictions of woman as independent and those of her as subordinate (p. 18).

Jensen takes exception to the contempt with which romances are viewed. She sees this as indicative of a male

chauvinist attitude, one that has contaminated even the feminists who have written on the genre in a derogatory way (Jensen, 1984, p. 24). She states:

Women may cross over on a limited basis into male spheres of activity in an attempt to capture some of their prestige and power but men do not cross over into female territory...This pattern also holds true in popular culture fiction. Although women cross over into masculine fantasies such as westerns and thrillers, men do not read romances. Their avoidance of the novels, in conjunction with women's association with them, contributes to romances' reputation as "trash" (p. 23).

Jensen's point here is lent support by the failure of The Baby-sitters Club to become a network series. The series was rejected because boys were not likely to watch it (Carter, 1991, C11).

Jensen has attempted to give a well rounded view of the Harlequin romance and its readers, and she points out that romance publishers in general have sought to keep up with the times by liberating their heroines to a certain extent. She concludes:

The romances we get are a product of a literary history, contemporary social changes and the corporate drive for profitability (Jensen, 1984, p. 164)..

This serves to support what was said in section 1.4 above. Over the years, there have been a number of girls' fiction series (Mason, 1975); as girls read more than boys, a publisher's energy is more profitably directed towards them. The Baby-sitters Club has made an attempt to cope with some of the issues of modernity by introducing such problems as

divorce. So "literary history, contemporary social changes and the corporate drive for profitability" have also combined to produce Ann M. Martin's popular series.

3.3.4 The adolescent romance genre and its readers...Linda Christian-Smith.

Romances are not just for adult women. Teenagers have their own version of the genre. Linda Christian-Smith (1988), who has done much research into the adolescent romance, argues that "these romance texts offer adolescent female readers subject positions within femininity as future keepers of heart and hearth" (p. 77). She shows how romance is sold as the ultimate way for a teen to hone her femininity, and how the novels give the teen girl reader models for coping within the present system of gender relations. However, her ethnography of a group of teenage readers has revealed that a number of interpretations are possible and that background and aspirations have a strong bearing on the meaning which these teenage girls make of the romances. The patriarchal system is fraught with contradictions. Christian-Smith (1988) concludes:

Given the power of cultural products like romance novels in preparing girls for their entrance into heterosexual romance, it is necessary to engage girls in a recognition of the contradictions surrounding femininity, both in narrative texts and in their own lives. In so doing, steps are taken towards acknowledging the things that hold women and girls captive, but also those which facilitate feminine power and authority (p. 97).

Christian-Smith has ended here on a positive note. She has pointed out that the construct of femininity itself is contradictory, and can lead to a position of powerlessness or strength for women. Hence, feminist concerns are to make females more aware of how these contradictions manifest themselves in books and in day-to-day life. Then, perhaps, the focus will be on those aspects that uplift women instead of degrading them. The result should be an alternative construction of femininity.

3.3.5 The limits on liberation in girls' books...Bobbie Ann Mason.

In her fascinating feminist exploration into girl detective novels, Bobbie Ann Mason (1975) points out the contradictions apparent in these types of books, contradictions which might accustom readers to similar examples in romances and soap operas later in life. Mason (1975) begins by establishing mysteries as the major preoccupation for bold females in girls' books, noting that boys' books, in contrast, "tend to be more action and less mystery, but boys have other adventurous roles as well--jungle explorer, inventor, soldier, athlete" (p. 6). She therefore poses the following questions: "Why is solving mysteries the special domain for girl adventurers in fiction? And have these "liberated" heroines liberated their readers?" (p. 6).

Using as illustrations such girls' series as The Outdoor Girls, and Nancy Drew, Mason (1975) sets out to show why the word "liberated" can only be used in quotation marks when applied to the heroines of these series. Of the Outdoor Girls, she says:

These heroines were "liberated", for they didn't wear bustles or look generally helpless and they could set out in their cars to do whatever they had a notion to do...These groups of girls had their weaknesses, however, the major one being romance. The girls weren't truly independent, for their money came from Daddy and their main interest was boys. They were almost invariably upper-crust. Many of them spent a good deal of time chattering and stuffing themselves with chocolates (p. 12).

Nancy Drew is another upper-crust female with both a father and a boyfriend to protect her if needed. She projects an image of almost masculine confidence combined with flawless feminine grooming. Nancy is, to all intents and purposes, perfect--a fantasy figure, rather than a practical role model (Mason, 1975, p. 84). When Mason was a child, Nancy appeared as "an elusive image, a mythic heroine on a flying trapeze" (Mason, 1975, p. 76).

Mason (1975) shares a valuable insight: the goals of all the fictional girl sleuths are self-defeating. It is a perfect paradox: The heroine wants to prove her liberated mentality by solving the mystery, but having solved the mystery she will no longer be liberated. As Mason (1975) expresses it:

...the girl sleuth is in pursuit of the very world --the happy ending, the mystery solved, the symbolic wedding--she seeks to escape. According

to the series' values, if Nancy were to marry, she would become Mrs. Bobbsey (p. 74).

Mrs. Bobbsey is the indulgent mother of the Bobbsey Twins, a mere shadow of a character, whose existence is justified only through the existence of her husband and children. She is, in effect, the traditional symbol of self-sacrificing domesticity; she is, in effect, boring and not in the least liberated.

In the previous two chapters, I have outlined some prominent theories related to the notion of ideology, given a general introduction to socialist feminism and its theory of capitalist patriarchy and then turned my attention to feminist writers who have examined "Feminine" literature. I have followed this procedure because the focus of my study is on ideology, specifically the ideology of capitalist patriarchy, which uses the notion of femininity to keep women in their subordinate position. "Feminine" literature serves to strengthen the mystique of femininity, and "feminine" literature must include The Baby-sitters Club, which is, after all, a series of fiction designed specially for girls.

The ideology theorists have provided a good foundation for this study. From Marx to Nichols, they have stated that ideology supports the status quo; Gramsci has noted that, in its attempt to reconcile contradictions in the society, ideology often becomes contradictory. There are many contradictions in The Baby-sitters Club.

Gramsci has also introduced the valuable concept of hegemony, through which the uncoerced consent of the subordinate classes is gained to reinforce the rule of the dominant. Hegemony works because it is all-pervasive--it is so entrenched in a culture that its brand of brain-washing passes for common sense; and because its frame is constantly expanding to allow token opposition. This token opposition is used to convince the subordinate classes that their needs are being met, while the essential structure remains unchanged. Arguably, there are oppositional elements in The Baby-sitters Club, but they might only represent an expansion of the hegemonic frame.

There are conflicting views as to whether "mass culture" or "popular culture" should be condemned as a vehicle for the dominant ideology or celebrated for its emancipatory potential. Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School and John Fiske of US Cultural Studies are at opposite ends of the spectrum, while Stuart Hall and other members of the British Cultural Studies group have a more balanced, open-minded approach. .

The Baby-sitters Club is an example of mass culture, and it has a narrative structure. Therefore, in my attempt to assess The Baby-sitters Club as an agent of either conformity or change, I have relied on Nichols to provide the characteristics for identifying a hegemonic structure in a

narrative. These characteristics are: confusion of logical types; contradiction and paradox; narrative closure.

At this point, I turned to Socialist Feminism and the theory of capitalist patriarchy, as developed first by Eisenstein. The merging of Marxist and feminist thought, which lets class and race be included with gender in the analysis of power relations, allows women to be seen not as one mass, but on different steps of the hierarchical structure according to their class and race. The hierarchy is very much in evidence in the status of the members of The Baby-sitters Club.

Ryan takes the theory of capitalist patriarchy and brings it to the realm of "feminine" literature. She shows how the interests of capitalism and patriarchy were closely intertwined in the development of women's literature of the nineteenth century. I would maintain that this is also true today, and that The Baby-sitters Club is of almost as much interest as a product of capitalism as it is of patriarchy. Ryan has pointed out that women have done much of the writing of "feminine" literature. They have therefore been collaborators in their own subordination and that of other women: the writer of The Baby-sitters Club is a woman.

According to Ryan, "feminine" literature is used by women for some relief from the frustrations of a patriarchal culture. Radway, Modleski and Jensen would agree with her. The three illustrate how a delicate balance is maintained so

that the contradictions in patriarchal society are apparent but the anger against them contained. One might say that hegemony is at work, here and in the adolescent romance novels and series books analysed by Christian-Smith and Mason respectively. The Baby-sitters Club is very much a hegemonic text.

Although their authors might vary considerably in the extent of their pessimism, all of the above studies of "feminine" literature suggest that female readers are very much like the girl sleuth analysed by Mason--rushing towards the place from which they seek to escape. The youngsters, who are still relatively free, long to fall in love and lose that freedom, and they read books which promote that feeling. The adult women, dissatisfied with life within the patriarchal system, having already proved its promises false, turn again to patriarchal propaganda as a means of easing their discontent.

Patriarchal propaganda is changing its form, as some concessions have had to be made to the women's movement and to the rights of minorities. Lower age groups are also being targetted with greater vigour. I shall be looking at The Baby-sitters Club as a new and improved container for the ideology of capitalist patriarchy, but I shall also be searching the books for any liberating potential.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

Analysis of text...is analysis of ideologically loaded structures and meanings, not of innocent, arbitrary, random structures. Answering the question of how texts mean therefore answers the question of how institutions mean. This is therefore analysis concerned with discourse as process, not with language as idealized product (Birch, 1989, p. 167).

My theoretical framework--a cultural studies perspective on ideology and hegemony, coupled with socialist feminist thought--was applied to my feminist materialist study of the first 50 books of The Baby-sitters Club series. As Birch (1989) says, "any form of textual analysis is grounded in theory and informed by ideology" (p. 1).

The emphasis was on the underlying structures of the series rather than on individual books, although plots and passages of individual books were used as illustrations. The theory of logical typing, with contradiction and paradox, was central to the analysis.

Evidence was sought for support for, and challenges to, the ideology of capitalist patriarchy. Such an ideology within the text would suggest traditional sex roles, sexual and racial stereotypes, unrealistic class representations and limiting constructions of femininity. I was looking for evidence of these through the exploration of the following themes, each of which will be elaborated in the respective sections:

- 4.2 Female friendship and female rivalry.
- 4.3 Older women and family situations.
- 4.4 Gender relations, sex and romance.
- 4.5 Work, play, pastimes and entertainment.
- 4.6 Race and class.

Together, these themes contain many of the grounds for contention between feminism and the hegemonic structure of capitalist patriarchy. Patriarchal ideology has done much to influence the portrayal of these themes in the past. It remained to be seen whether The Baby-sitters Club showed any potential as part of an empowerment strategy for young girls, or whether, alternatively, The Baby-sitters Club was merely a tool of capitalist patriarchy.

The themes are not mutually exclusive. Any material appropriate to more than one theme will be re-presented wherever it can contribute to the analysis. The rationale for each theme will be explained, and I will present a brief development of the individual theme as it appears in The Baby-sitters Club.

"Oh, brother," said Kristy. "Listen to us. Think lovely thoughts. Do you know who we sound like? We sound like Peter Pan, that's who. Peter Pan. We are baby-sitters, not magical, flying boys..." (Claudia and the new girl; Martin, 1989b, p. 76).⁴

Ironically, considering the quote above, my textual analysis of The Baby-sitters Club reveals a picture of girls who have the illusion of flying but who are always restricted by invisible strands. As discussed in the second and third

chapters, particularly in section 2.8.1, the hegemonic frame expands to include oppositional elements, seemingly to open up the possibilities for feminist discussion. In reality, however, the object is to neutralize these oppositional elements and create an idyllic final impression. "Think lovely thoughts." This will be evident in all of the themes examined.

4.2 Female Friendship and Female Rivalry

Historically there has been a tendency in media portrayals to pit women against each other, to cast them as rivals rather than as friends. Weibel (1977), for example, emphasizes that "modern romances, much like nineteenth-century fiction, take female rivalry for granted" (p. 37). "Divide and rule" is a structure of patriarchy. Therefore, for feminists, friendships between and among females have been seen as important to the struggle for equality. Ferguson (1991) states:

...prioritizing women's friendships is a necessity if feminists are to alter the patriarchal sex/affective bonding system that keeps men's ties with each other strong while women's ties with each other are either weak or reactionary (p. 235).

The Baby-sitters Club books could be commended for their portrayal of strong female friendships, especially among all the girls in the Baby-sitters Club. The character Mary Anne sums the situation up well:

If there were such a thing, I think the BSC members would be the Seven Musketeers. Oh, sure, we've had

our arguments and fights, but we're usually there for each other, through thick and thin. And we're pretty understanding of each other. (Mary Anne vs. Logan; Martin, 1991i, p. 24).

Mary Anne mentions "arguments and fights" and there have been a number of them, due to personality conflicts, lack of communication, the desire to succeed... However, the Babysitters Club members have a friendship strong enough to endure. They provide a prime example of female bonding.

The female friendship enjoyed by the members is such that it even survives the intrusion of the male love interest. This is unusual, because, as Gilbert and Taylor (1991) point out, it is the mode for teen romances to "position" readers to think that love is all-encompassing, and the god to which all else, even friendship, is to be sacrificed (pp. 79-80). This is part of the ideology of femininity, and part of the structure of patriarchy: "the mediation of women's lives and attitudes by male power and control is based on the oldest imperial strategy, divide-and-rule" (Wilden, 1987a, p. 86). "Divide and rule", in this case, refers to the rivalry among women, and their subsequent isolation, which make them unaware of their oppression and of the possibility of banding together to battle against it.

Kristy notes the possibility of the separation of friends with the appearance of a boyfriend, but affirms that this need not be so:

Jessi hung back, and I knew just what she was thinking. What would happen to her friendship with Mal if Mal had a boyfriend? I knew she was

wondering that because I wondered the same thing when Mary Anne first started going out with Logan. I also knew that--soon--Jessi would see that she and Mal were still best friends, and that a best friend is very different from a boyfriend. The two don't usually cancel each other out. (Kristy and the secret of Susan; Martin, 1990e, pp. 144-145).

Not a boy but a girl comes between two best friends, Claudia and Stacey, in the book Claudia and the new girl (Martin, 1989a), and new criteria for female friendship is revealed through the dichotomization of stereotypes. Ashley Wyeth, a sparkling talent as an artist, is that girl. She becomes Claudia's mentor and friend, to the exclusion of the other Baby-sitters. However, Claudia eventually realizes that Ashley, like Claudia's genius sister Janine, communicates much better with inanimate objects--in Ashley's case, a piece of art, in Janine's, a computer--than with people. Both are solitary beings. Claudia and the reader are left to conclude that it is better to reside in mediocrity, where there is plenty of company, than to be isolated in brilliance.

Claudia, poor student, compares herself to Janine, genius: "I'm outgoing and have a lot of friends; Janine sticks to herself and has almost no friends. (That's what happens when your parents want you to be a physicist.)" (Claudia and mean Janine; Martin, 1987b, p. 3). Selecting a role model would not be difficult for many Baby-sitters Club readers. Who would want "almost no friends"? There is therefore a definite discouragement of exceptional academic and artistic achievement in these books through the dichotomization of

stereotypes. The message of the ideology of femininity (discussed in section 3.2) is not new: a woman who is too intelligent, talented or ambitious is unnatural. As Brownmiller (1984) says:

...high among its known satisfactions, femininity offers a welcome retreat from the demands of ambition...But there is no getting around the fact that ambition is not a feminine trait. More strongly expressed, a lack of ambition---is virtuous proof of the nurturant feminine nature which, if absent, strikes at the guilty heart of femaleness itself (p. 221).

Jessi, the promising black ballerina, proves the exception to the rule. She shows that it is possible to belong to a warm circle of friends, like the Baby-sitters Club, and still be a star. One does not have to choose. She gives the readers incentive to strive for excellence. However, Jessi, by virtue of her race, is not a character with whom the majority of readers are likely to identify, and her success, for the same reason, appears highly unrealistic. As Bell Hooks (1990) states,

The difficulties women of color face in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy are intense. We can only respect and admire all among us who manage to resist, who become self-actualized. We need to cherish and honor those among us who emerge as "stars", not because they are above us but because they share with us light that guides, providing insight and necessary wisdom. To be a star, a diva, carries with it responsibility; one must learn to know and respect boundaries, using power in ways that enrich and uplift (p. 102).

Jessi, the fictional black character of a white creator, cannot live up to her responsibility. She is only a token symbol, constrained by more common and more easily

recognizable stereotypical portrayals in The Baby-sitters Club.

In the Baby-sitters' friendship is a solidarity which makes them secure in the face of attack. They do not need their male friends to defend them, as has been the case in other series like Nancy Drew (see section 3.3.5). Mary Anne, the shyest of all the Baby-sitters, is bold enough to think this when her boyfriend fancies the role of hero in Mary Anne and the search for Tigger (Martin, 1989j):

I could have hidden with Logan, but he wanted to be alone in case he had to rush out and do something daring. What he didn't realize was that if he did, I'd join him in a second, followed by all the other members of the Baby-sitters Club.
We stick together [emphasis added] (p. 106).

Important to the topic of female rivalry among the Baby-sitters Club is the competition in looks and dress, especially related to Stacey and Claudia. When the two meet, they are unsure whether to hate each other or to be friends because each wants to be the "coolest" girl in school (Kristy and the Mother's Day surprise; Martin, 1989f, pp. 87-88). This calls to mind the words of Wolf (1991):

The unknown woman, the [beauty] myth would like women to believe, is unapproachable; under suspicion before she opens her mouth because she's Another Woman, and beauty thinking urges women to approach one another as possible adversaries until they know they are friends (p. 75).

In the end, what could have made Stacey and Claudia enemies instead makes them the best of friends--their common interest in appearance and dress.

The constant self-rating in which many girls indulge is here illustrated by Stacey in The truth about Stacey (Martin, 1986c). She is secretly comparing herself to her friends, and the depth of her narcissism is revealed: "If I could have looked at myself [emphasis added], I would have seen a second trendy dresser and a fourth long face, more sophisticated than Kristy's or Mary Anne's, but not nearly as beautiful as Claudia's" (p. 9).

Stacey is young enough a character to openly embrace the values that Wolf (1991) says many women secretly do:

Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns--to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes--matter so much. But in spite of shame, guilt, and denial, more and more women are wondering if it isn't that they are entirely neurotic and alone but rather that something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty (p. 9).

This competition for beauty status often leads to division among women (Wolf, 1991, p. 14). It is, however, usually girls outside the Baby-sitters Club who try to undermine the lead characters. In the first example, Liz and Michelle try to ruin the Baby-sitters business through unethical practices. They are exhibiting a very materialistic outlook--the only job satisfaction is in the attainment of money; cut-throat practices are acceptable in dealing with competition. Ironically, this outlook on competition is accepted as masculine in the business world, but in the private sphere, especially when coupled with envy and the

pursuit of the opposite sex, it is generally perceived to be feminine. As Wilden (1987a) says, "Boys learn to compete for power, girls learn to compete for boys" (p. 86).

Three other examples illustrate this "feminine" side of the competition. In the first love triangle, found in Mary Anne's bad-luck mystery (Martin, 1988h), Grace, a schoolmate of the Baby-sitters, becomes infatuated with Logan, Mary Anne's boyfriend. She, Cokie and some other friends play an extended practical joke on Mary Anne and the Baby-sitters in hope of embarrassing them all in front of Logan, so that he will associate with them instead. The plan, however, backfires and they are the ones humiliated. Logan remains loyal.

In the second love triangle, featured in Mary Anne misses Logan (Martin, 1991h), the young sweethearts have separated, but Mary Anne wants a reconciliation. Cokie still wants Logan, and does date him for a while. However, Logan has always loved only Mary Anne. Mary Anne, even when missing Logan, is also concerned about her school project; Cokie, the supposed femme fatale, has no interest in books at all, and in the end not only loses Logan but looks foolish as well.

In another example of female rivalry, found in Jessi and the dance school phantom (Martin, 1991d), Hilary, under pressure from her mother to be a star ballerina, is resentful of the attention that Jessi receives, especially when the latter is awarded the leading role in the ballet "The sleeping

beauty". She therefore sets out to force Jessi to surrender her role through threats and minor sabotage. (One stunt causes Jessi to fall and strain her ankle.) With a little help from her friends, Jessi discovers the villain. Hilary apologises and later decides, on her own accord, to leave the ballet school. Jessi reacts to this news:

I gave her a hug. "Good luck," I said. "I'll miss you in class." And as soon as I said it, I knew it was true. I would miss her. Hilary's okay. And maybe once she quits dance her mother will go easier on her (p. 165).

The Baby-sitters show themselves to be surprisingly forgiving to their tormentors. In victory, they are gracious, and display an understanding of the motivation behind the acts against them. An element of sympathy is shown by Mary Anne for her defeated rival:

I thought about that. It made sense. Cokie flaunted her relationship with Logan. She also truly liked him. She hadn't set out to make my life miserable. She just had a crush on Logan. That was something I could certainly understand. (Mary Anne misses Logan; Martin, 1991h, p. 135).

"She hadn't set out to make my life miserable." In Mary Anne's compassion is a possible model for combatting the backlash against feminism, encouraging as it does female rivalry. Even if circumstances cause them to hold opposing views or interests, women should be able to look beyond these areas of contention to the commonality of their experience as women, trying to survive within the restraints of capitalist patriarchy. As Eisenstein (1979) says:

While the differences must be acknowledged (and provide political priorities), the feminist struggle begins from the commonality that derives from the particular roles women share in patriarchy (p. 35).

There is, however, a paradoxical flip-side to this upbeat message of female solidarity in The Baby-sitters Club. The Baby-sitters always beat their female rivals, and are magnanimous to them in victory. "Good girls always finish first". In fact, Kristy and the baby parade (Martin, 1991f) chronicles the Baby-sitters' one major failure as a group in 50 books, and even in that instance they received new clients from their misadventure.

This constant good fortune does not reflect reality. Mason's (1975) comments on Nancy Drew (discussed in section 3.3.5) appear transferable to the Baby-sitters Club: "The reader escapes to dreamland where she expends her imaginative energies, and then returns (sometimes crashing) to an entirely different reality" (p. 84).

One wonders whether readers of The Baby-sitters Club might not become tired of the "Seven Musketeers" scenario, if it does not reflect their life, and turn to something different, yet, in terms of fantasy, very much the same--romance novels where "the good girl always finishes happily with the guy". A stronger--and more narrowly framed--patriarchal message awaits.

4.3 Family Situations and Older Women

The portrayal of older women and of family situations in novels and series such as The Baby-sitters Club provides models for the future for young readers. These models might offer the readers a world of endless possibilities, a very restrictive framework or a compromise between the two.

As confirmed by Mason's (1975) feminist study of girls detective fiction (see section 3.3.5), it has been common for girls books to depict the young protagonists as either having grown up in an idyllic nuclear family or in one in which there was one widowed parent--in these books, divorce did not exist. If mothers were alive, they were often cast as happy home-makers like Mrs. Bobbsey (see section 3.3.5). I look to see, therefore, if young readers are presented with choices and alternatives, or whether they are only offered a narrow view: that of the home-making mother and the nuclear family, both so important to the maintenance of patriarchal rule.

In The Baby-sitters Club, portraits of family situations are varied. Fewer than half of the Baby-sitters (three out of seven) come from a traditionally styled family; almost all mothers work and there are examples of fathers taking charge of the kitchen and of the child-rearing. These appear to be oppositional portrayals, i.e., they run counter to traditional patriarchal ideology. The departures from the norm cause the character Kristy to ponder:

I've been thinking about families lately, wondering what makes one. Is a family really a mother, a

father, and a kid or two? I hope not, because if that's a family, then I haven't got one. And neither do a lot of other people I know (Kristy and the Mother's Day surprise; Martin, 1989g, p. 1).

Kristy does not have a traditional nuclear family, which could itself be seen as ideological construction. As Barrett (1980) states "...it is here more than anywhere else that we can see most clearly an ideological process by which supposedly natural relations between parents and children, men and women, are struggled for" (p. 205). The author and publishers of The Baby-sitters Club are obviously ready to acknowledge that many children do not have nuclear families. Ostensibly, their frame is not exclusionary. The examples below would tend to support the idea of openness.

The Brewer household (Kristy's family) is quite egalitarian in terms of house management. Males and females share the chores. This is especially significant because it is the home of a millionaire, Watson, who is Kristy's stepfather:

Here's another thing about Watson that's not so bad. He helps out around the house--with the cooking, cleaning, gardening, everything... He and Mom share the workload equally. They both have jobs, they both prepare meals (Watson is actually a better cook than Mom is), they both run errands, etc. Twice a week, a cleaning lady comes in, and my brothers and I are responsible for certain chores, but basically Mom and Watson run the show.

So I wasn't surprised when I stepped into the kitchen the Monday morning to find Mom making coffee and Watson scrambling eggs. Sam was setting the table and Charlie was pouring orange juice. It was a nice familiar scene (Kristy and the snobs; Martin, 1988e, pp. 4-5).

Such a situation is not achieved without a struggle, as is discovered in Poor Mallory! (Martin, 1990i). In this book, Mallory's father, a corporate lawyer, has lost his job, and her mother must do temporary work. Despondent about his unemployed state, Mr. Pike does not want to do anything. The house and children are neglected. Mrs. Pike decides that it is time to put an end to the situation. Mallory narrates:

"Mom," I said, feeling guilty, "I'm sorry about the house. I should have cleaned it up this afternoon, but I -- "

"It's not your fault," my mother interrupted me. "And it's not your job, either. You have homework and baby-sitting." She turned to Dad. "It's your job," she said flatly. "When I go to work and you stay at home, then you keep house, just like I do when I'm at home."

"Excuse me?" replied my father.

....

We couldn't overhear the fight--it wasn't loud enough--but my mother must have won. By the following Tuesday, Dad had taken over Mom's old role completely (p. 79).

Mrs. Pike is a positive role model in this instance. She is showing girls that women, too, have rights which they must defend and which they can hold victorious.

In the Spier household, before the courtship and remarriage of Mr. Richard Spier (after which he miraculously softened), Mary Anne was under the strong patriarchal rule of her father. Kristy gives her assessment of the situation:

Mary Anne's father is the only family she's got... Unfortunately, her father is pretty strict. My mother says it's just because Mr. Spier is nervous since Mary Anne is all he's got. You'd think, though, that he could let her hair down instead of always in braids, or give her permission to ride her bike to the mall with Claudia and me once in a while. But, no. At Mr. Spier's house it's rules,

rules, rules. It's a miracle that Mary Anne was even allowed to become a member of the Baby-sitters Club (Kristy's great idea; Martin, 1986b, p. 5).

We turn from a widower's household to the pain and anger of divorce, a powerful counter to the "happy ending" patriarchal myth of romance (see discussion by Radway in section 3.3.1). This is explored in Welcome back, Stacey (Martin, 1989k). This excerpt features part of one of the fights precipitating the end of the union of Stacey's parents. Stacey narrates:

I stood there, frozen. I couldn't move. Part of me was wondering just what my mother had bought, but most of me was waiting to hear how she'd answer Dad. Sometimes she cries.

Not that time. She spat out her answer as if the words tasted bad. "Jewelry," she said. "Maybe if you were home more often I wouldn't be so bored. When I get bored I shop...sometimes."

"Sometimes? Try all the time. And if you're so bored, get a job," shouted Dad. "Do something with your life instead of supporting every store in the city. Spend more time with your daughter" (p. 11).

This is one of the more harshly realistic scenes from the series. The examples above portray a variety of living situations, which in turn suggest a progressive outlook on the part of the publishers of The Baby-sitters Club, and their instinct for profit-making: contemporary themes are likely to attract a larger readership. However, although the books also deal with other difficult issues which confront children, like disability, terminal illness and death, there are no attempts to grope with the reality of incest, of sexual abuse, of young unwanted pregnancy or of physical domestic violence. All of

these are very much a part of the world for too many children; the fact that the culprits are often male might partly account for the silence surrounding them, although there are more complicated reasons. Parents and teachers may consider the subject matter taboo, and the first goals of publishers are to please (i.e., not to offend) and to make money. Therefore the books remain sanitized (c.f. Jenkins, 1992, p. 29). Interdependence apparently does exist between patriarchy and capitalism, as expected by Eisenstein (1979):

...patriarchy (as male supremacy) provides the sexual hierarchical ordering of society for political control and as a political system cannot be reduced to its economic structure; while capitalism as an economic class system driven by the pursuit of profit feeds off the patriarchal ordering (p. 28).

The following excerpt represents the closest that Martin, the author, comes to broaching one of these controversial topics in the 50 books examined in this paper. Stacey is the narrator and the first speaker:

"Well, what if the someone who would be in danger was a little kid, and the someone putting him in danger was someone his parents trusted, but if you told, you would look bad?"

"Stacey Elizabeth," my mother said sharply. "You're not talking about child abuse, are you?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that."

I could see the relief in Mom's eyes. (The truth about Stacey; Martin, 1986c, p. 130).

In this excerpt, the mention of child abuse is due only to a misunderstanding. Similarly, there are serious adult female issues which are hinted at but never developed by the author, e.g., women's fear of male violence; women doing

violence to themselves with anorexia and bulimia.

Ideology, as conceived by Marx, has two related characteristics: the concealment of societal contradictions and the advocacy for continued rule by the dominant class; therefore, to support the ideology of capitalist patriarchy, fear must turn to happiness or amusement in stories found in The Baby-sitters Club. The following are examples: mysterious phone calls frighten the Baby-sitters in Claudia and the phantom phone calls (Martin, 1986a); in true Gothic fashion, an apparent obsessive lover terrifies Kristy in Kristy's mystery admirer (Martin, 1990f).

The resolutions in these two cases are happy, each related to courtship. The mysterious caller is a boy who wishes Claudia to accompany him to the Halloween Hop. The obsessive lover turns out to be part genuine--it is an appealing admirer--and part prank played by Cokie, a schoolmate unfriendly towards the Baby-sitters.

The latter story is a good example of narrative closure and of its function in resolving apparent paradoxes (Nichols, 1981; see section 2.8.3). In this case, in his love notes, the mysterious admirer says that he loves Kristy; in his love notes, he also wishes her harm. In reality, such a paradox would probably be unresolved--no one would ever understand--but it could easily have a tragic conclusion. Many women are hunted--and killed--by obsessed lovers whom they barely know.

Similarly, Claudia and her secret "junk-food binges" are treated as humorous rather than as a problem. Coupled with the pressure from her strict parents and the constant suffering from comparison with her genius sister Janine, in another story Claudia's symptoms would be those of bulimia, especially since she remains thin; in The Baby-sitters Club her concealment of snacks all over her bedroom is regarded as an amusing eccentricity. An opportunity to create knowledge and critical awareness in young girls about the dangers of the beauty myth⁵ has been ignored; instead, the beauty myth has been perpetuated--by Claudia's thinness and flawless complexion--and consumerism supported. (The brand names of the snacks which Claudia conceals--e.g, Cheese Doodles, Cracker Jacks, Doritos, Snickers, M & Ms....--are receiving much exposure in the books.) The linkage between capitalism and patriarchy, such as maintained by Eisenstein (1979) and discussed in 3.2, is also clear here.

The mothers of the Baby-sitters and of their charges prove to be a varied collection. Some appear positive role models; some negative; and some just seem very human. I shall select five examples.

Mrs. Pike and Mrs. Thomas, the mothers of Mallory and Kristy respectively, represent two strong women. Mrs. Pike effectively manages a household which includes eight children; after her husband's fleeting unemployment, she also undertakes temporary jobs. Mrs. Thomas was deserted by her husband but

managed to find a good job to support her four children virtually single-handedly.

Mrs. Pike and Mrs. Thomas are practical women. In contrast is Mrs. Prezioso, who is given a negative value judgment in the series. In Mary Anne saves the day (Martin, 1987e) Mary Anne describes her:

She's fussy and fastidious, kind of like the neat half of The Odd Couple. She's always polite, and she usually appears to have stepped right out of the pages of those magazines that gives tips on getting out hard-to-remove stains and baking the perfect loaf of zucchini bread (p. 59).

Mrs. Prezioso could be said to pay attention to detail, but not to any that matters. The Baby-sitters realize that her influence is having an ill effect on her daughter, their charge, Jenny.

Mrs. Barrett is the perfect example of someone who is simply trying to get along, and she suffers by being compared by implication to Mrs. Pike in Dawn and the impossible three (Martin, 1987c). Mrs. Barrett enters the series as a newly divorced woman with children who is looking for a job. She has not gotten accustomed to her new status. Dawn describes her:

She was looking as beautiful as usual--all cool and fresh, with her long, slim legs crossed in front of her. Mrs. Barrett was gorgeous. She always looked so together. But her house didn't and her kids didn't (p. 147).

Mrs. Barrett is like a Cosmopolitan girl who did not quite "make it". As Wolf (1991) points out, the formula of post-women's movement magazines, initiated by Cosmo, "includes

an aspirational, individualist, can-do tone that says that you should be your best and nothing should get in your way" (p. 69). Mrs. Barrett only appears "together" to outsiders. She is not handling the pressure of her new independence well. However, she keeps trying, with a little coercion from Dawn, and she becomes a passable working mother, if not Superwoman.

Dawn's mother, Sharon, makes no pretence at being Superwoman. Sharon is as disorganized as Mrs. Pike is organized. However, Sharon is a romantic and Sharon is loved--by her daughter, and by Richard, her childhood and present-day sweetheart.

One can take both patriarchal and liberating messages from these women. First of all, Mrs. Pike and Mrs. Thomas both find themselves using their organizational skills managing households of hordes of children. Although they both work, Mrs. Pike only "temps" and Mrs. Thomas' job, although "good", is not seen to be worthy of a title. Hegemony is clearly at work here--strong women are shown but in a subordinate, traditional role.

Mrs. Prezioso is a caricature whom readers can safely hate because she is so exaggerated. However, if the female readers looked closely, they might see aspects of themselves. After all, Mrs. Prezioso just wants everything to be in the right place. She wants to be part of the perfect family, as prescribed by patriarchal women's magazines.

Mrs. Barrett could be considered a welcome addition to the cast because she is so human. She needs time; unlike Mrs. Pike, she does not get everything right on the first try. Unfortunately, Mrs. Barrett could also be seen as patriarchal proof that most women cannot cope on their own. Those who do cope supposedly feel guilty, as Mrs. Thomas shows. Her daughter Kristy talks about her:

I wish she wouldn't feel guilty. It's not her fault that Dad ran off to California and got married again and doesn't send Mom much child support money. Mom says she doesn't want more money, though. She has a terrific job at this big company in Stamford, and she likes the fact that she can support us so well. It makes her feel proud and independent. But she still feels guilty (Kristy's great idea; Martin, 1986b, p. 16).

Mrs. Thomas' pride and independence is resolved during the course of the series--she marries a millionaire. Her "terrific" job can now be little more than a hobby. Mrs. Thomas, strong woman, has achieved the shining goal of the traditional woman, and patriarchal ideology has been doubly enforced by the choice of character used to perpetuate the dream of marrying a millionaire.

Sharon, on the one hand, is the embodiment of a message for women to relax and stop trying to be Mrs. Prezziosos. On the other hand, she is a vital part of the hegemonic scheme. Sharon may be disorganized but she is romantic, and, for this reason, she is chosen to be the adult Cinderella of the series, marrying her childhood sweetheart after she was

divorced and he widowed. Romance and marriage, even in the midst of countless divorces, are validated.

In The Baby-sitters Club series, the previous generation of women role models--the old--might at first appear to be stereotyped--Mimi as the sweet old grandmother; Mrs. Porter as the "witch" (quite literally in the minds of the children); Jessi's Aunt Cecelia as the miserable old widow (there are no spinsters/never-married women in these books); and Nannie, introduced later in the series as the robust fun-loving eccentric.

I shall discuss Nannie first, because, in spite of being the most colourful old woman, she exists as a largely voiceless sketch rather than a genuine character. Kristy says about her:

Nannie is really great. She's in her seventies, but she does all sorts of things. She goes bowling, she does gardening, she volunteers at the hospital, she's a terrific cook--and she sews (Kristy's big day; Martin, 1987d, p. 58).

Nannie drives an ancient car, painted pink. It is in discussion with her daughter (Kristy's mother) about this matter that Nannie utters two of her few--and most memorable--words of the series:

"Pink!" my mother exclaimed when she heard the news. "For heaven's sake, why pink?"

"Why not?" Nannie had answered gaily. And then she had fastened a pink plastic flower to the antenna and hung a little stuffed koala bear from the rearview mirror. She named her car the Pink Clinker (Kristy's big day; Martin, 1987a, pp. 60-61).

Free-spirited Nannie heads three generations of tough, independent women. Mrs. Thomas and Kristy have followed her example. Wolf (1991) comments on the relationship between aged and young women:

Aging in women is "unbeautiful" since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all our female life span (p. 14).

Kristy and her female forebears have exempted themselves from that vicious cycle. Although Mary Anne is caught up in the beauty myth, she does not fear Mimi or think her "unbeautiful", perhaps because, even without makeup or jewellery, Mimi is feminine and powerless. This is Mary Anne's portrait of Claudia's beloved grandmother, who is also Mary Anne's confidant and only remaining link to her dead mother:

I looked at Mimi. Her black hair, which had long been streaked with white, was pushed away from her face and fastened into a bun just above her neck. She wore no jewelry and no makeup, and her face was wrinkled and creased. I thought she was beautiful. Maybe it was because she was always so serene (Mary Anne saves the day; Martin, 1987e, pp. 76-77).

However, Mimi is not only portrayed as the sweet old grandmother, except perhaps in the books which follow her stroke and later death. In the earlier books, she is also the wise old woman, the keeper of what little Japanese tradition there is present in the books, the one on whom the girls rely for guidance in their lives. Here, for example, Mary Anne receives some requested words of wisdom from Mimi:

"Well, I will tell you something that I have often told my Claudia. If you do not like the way things are, you must change them yourself."

"But I've tried!" I exclaimed.

"Perhaps you have not found the right way yet. If this is truly important to you, then there is a right way to change it. And I know that you, my Mary Anne, will find that way" (Mary Anne saves the day; Martin, 1987e, p. 79).

Mimi is in her own way a positive force, much as the wise old woman is in Native Indian tradition. She is, however, sometimes surprisingly modern in her thoughts. For instance, she believes that the act of reading is more important than the reading material (a conclusion she seems to share with Mackey (1990)). That is why, for a long time, Mimi was the only family member who knew that Claudia read Nancy Drew (Claudia and the phantom phone calls; Martin, 1986a, p. 6). Mimi's death in the middle of the series provided the opportunity for nostalgia, as she became even more revered by the characters for her benign femininity.

Mrs. Porter, the "witch", and Aunt Cecelia, the domineering old woman, also benefit from episodes which portray them differently--i.e, in a more sympathetic light. This may be seen as evidence of the feminine empathy in the writer.

The witch gathers information through her own senses and through her word-magic...She is aware of what she wants and able to get it--and for this she is punished at the end of the story because she is not an acceptable model in a male-oriented society. Too independent and capable, she is a potential threat and must be suppressed (Waelti-Walters, 1982, p. 81).

Particularly in the eyes of Karen, Kristy's young step-sister, Mrs. Porter assumes the awesome identity of Morbidda Destiny, caster of spells. Karen has other children convinced. Even Kristy is not quite sure whether or not to believe.

In Good-bye Stacey, good-bye (Martin, 1988b) an interesting duality in Mrs. Porter is exposed. The children want to make real lemonade but do not have real lemons. Mrs. Porter claims to have some, and invites the children over. The children are very hesitant, but, detecting that Mrs. Porter is lonely, Kristy coaxes them next door. Mrs. Porter does little to allay the children's fears:

"Here we go," she said, and began to pour. She also began to cackle. Karen looked ready to faint, but Mrs. Porter gave a tiny smile. (Kristy almost thought she saw Mrs. Porter wink.)

"I thought you were going to show us how to make this," said Karen warily. She gazed around the sagging front porch.

"Was I?" said Mrs. Porter. "Well, I brewed [italics added] it up pretty quickly." She reached into the house and pulled a broom onto the front porch (p. 81).

Mrs. Porter is playing to her audience, but Kristy stumbles onto her secret in spying two empty cans of frozen lemonade on the counter in the house (p. 84). This leads Kristy to this quasi-conclusion:

Old Mrs. Porter was just a lonely woman who wanted company.

Of course, Kristy thought as she returned to the front porch and looked at Mrs. Porter, the black cat, and the broomstick, you can never be sure (p. 84).

Mrs. Porter is therefore left as an ambiguous character, with the question "witch or lonely old woman?" unanswered. One does not know whether to attribute to her power or pathos, especially in light of Waelti-Walters (1982) words above. Since this is not a fairy-tale world, readers know, however, that Mrs. Porters power is illusory. Unlike the fairy tale witches about whom Waelti-Walters writes, Mrs. Porter does not have the means to triumph over a male-dominated world. Instead, she is the embodiment of Wolf's (1991) words on "unbeautiful" aging (p. 14; already quoted in this section); she is the ageless stereotype of the old woman whom the young women like Karen subconsciously fear lest she represent their future. As an old woman, Mrs. Porter is also caught in a double bind: she keeps her mystery, and remains lonely but a source of fear and excitement for the youth; or she exposes herself as a needy woman and only invites pity.

Aunt Cecelia, Jessi's aunt, is very unpopular with her nieces when she enters the series. This is Jessi's initial reaction to her:

Aunt Cecelia is absolutely awful. I can't tell you how many things are wrong with her. She may be Daddy's older sister, but she smells funny. Bad perfume, probably. And she is bossy and mean and thinks Mama and Daddy don't raise Becca and Squirt and me right (Jessi's baby-sitter; Martin, 1990d, p. 7).

Yet during the course of the book Jessi's baby-sitter (Martin, 1990d), Aunt Cecelia is shown to have a remarkable saving grace--a sense of humour. Soon after her arrival,

Jessi and her younger sister, Becca, short-sheeted her bed, filled one of her slippers with shaving cream and put a rubber spider on her pillow (pp. 56-57).

Aunt Cecelia said not a word; she simply waited for the opportunity to return the favour.

Then we bolted for my room. I found shaving cream in my slippers and a furry mouse (fake) under my pillow, and discovered that my bed had been short-sheeted.

Becca and I just looked at each other.

Then we heard gentle laughter. We turned around. Aunt Cecelia was standing in my doorway, holding Squirt on her hip.

"I guess were even now," said my aunt.

I couldn't help smiling. "I guess so" (p. 136).

This is the beginning of a more cordial relationship between Aunt Cecelia and her charges. Other than in the book in which she is introduced, however, she is rarely seen.

Jenkins (1992) sees the portrayal of Nannie, Mimi And Aunt Cecilia as racial stereotyping--the hearty, robust American white woman, the fragile Japanese flower, the overbearing black woman (p. 21). I agree. However, when the figure of Mrs. Porter is included, they can also be seen as comprising a small-scale kaleidoscopic portrait of the aged Woman--admittedly restricted, even stereotypic, not offering the diversity of the mothers.

The strong role models, like Mrs. Pike, Mrs. Thomas, and Nannie, often by their silence or absence, leave the road open for Mimi to preach a traditional femininity. Mimi appears as a flesh and blood character; the others are skeletal,

virtually one-dimensional. This is support for Dow's belief (1990; see section 2.8.2): mere representation is not the answer in the struggle to be heard; there must be balance in portrayal as well in order for fairness for women to exist in the world of popular culture. Hegemony prevents this: it undercuts what appears to be the progressive element.

Characteristics of hegemony are also shown in the portrayal of the family situations. There is an improvement on the restrictive depiction of the nuclear home circle; the publishers are willing to concede social changes and accept divorce and remarriage; they also accept that mothers will work and that fathers will assist with the home. However, there are topics damaging to the system, e.g., child abuse, which are never mentioned, or if mentioned, are only hinted at and passed aside. The hegemonic frame widens to include token oppositional views, but it stretches only so far.

As Hall (1979) comments in section 2.8.2, the fact that negotiated decodings exist allow for a wide range of interpretations to be made. I believe that the varied portrayals of women and of family situations allow for this multiplicity of interpretations; they invite negotiated decodings from the readers. We must recall, however, that Hall emphasized that negotiated decodings "also legitimate the wider reach, the inclusive reference, the greater overall coherence of the dominant encodings" (pp. 344-345). In other words, everything falls within the hegemonic frame.

4.4 Gender Relations, Sex, and Romance

She acts like all the guys in the seventh grade aren't the same goony boys they were last year. Last year, the boys were saying, "Want some ABC gum?" and then handing us the gum out of their mouths, saying, "Its Already-Been-Chewed, get it?" and laughing hysterically. Last year, the boys were giving us noogies on our arms and throwing spitballs at us. Last year, the boys were pulling our chairs out from under us when we stood up to answer questions. This year (if you listen to Claudia), the boys are heroes. Personally, I don't see any change (Kristy's great idea; Martin, 1986b, pp. 24-25).

In The Baby-sitters Club we generally only see the "female" perspective on gender relations, unless the fictional girl narrator allows a boy to express himself in conversation. This supposedly turns the tables: women are usually those silenced except in women's romance novels. However, in The Baby-sitters Club as in the romance genre, it is still the dominant message being voiced by the female narrators.

It appears that the gamut of young males runs from Alan Gray, who epitomizes the kind described above, to Logan, who resembles fictional star Cam Geary and is the steady, loyal boyfriend. The difference between the two boys is perplexing, since both are around the same age. Alan Gray and his friends, with their pranks, are, however, more realistic. They provide the cathartic experience, where young female readers can vent their frustrations at their own condition through the pages of a book; Logan is the romantic stereotype, the sensitive, caring boyfriend, who prevents them from

seeking to change that condition. Like Harlequins, The Baby-sitters Club books are "ambiguous and contradictory, a fascinating combination of the realistic problems women face in our society and escapist solutions" (Jensen, 1984, p. 18, previously quoted in 3.3.3).

In Logan likes Mary Anne! (Martin, 1988g) the paradoxical message appears to be: girls can talk to boys in the same way that they talk to girls in friendship but not in business. Mary Anne, Secretary of the Baby-sitters Club, states near the beginning of the book:

I used to think, What do you say to a boy? Then I realized you can talk to a boy the same way you talk to a girl. You just have to choose your topics more carefully. Obviously, with a boy, you can't talk about bras or cute guys you see on TV, but you can talk about school and movies and animals and sports (if you know anything about sports) (p. 4).

Yet, when Mary Anne's love interest, Logan, joins the Baby-sitters Club, there is chaos. In the end, it is agreed that he will function only as an Associate Member, so that he will not need to attend meetings. Mary Anne talks about the alternative:

I had visions of one uncomfortable meeting after another, each of us trying not to talk about boys, trying not to mention things that were unmentionable, and of poor Lennie the ragdoll spending the rest of her days under Claudia's bed (pp. 70-71).

It is significant that there is no attempt to resolve this difficulty in any other way than by deciding that Logan not attend the meetings. He is not allowed a full entry into

what is predominantly a woman's business. One might wonder whether this story could also serve as an "explanation" of why women have not been allowed a full entry into a man's world. It certainly illustrates a sleight-of-hand resolution to a still largely unresolved paradox (see section 2.8.3).

Mimi and Claudia provide an introduction to the next topic: romance.

"It happens that way sometimes. Happen when I meet your grandfather. In one second I know...knew...we would fall in love, be married, have children."

"Really?" I said. I was awed. What a second that must have been. I guess you need those seconds to make up for all the dull ones when you're just watching flies land on people's heads (Claudia and the new girl; Martin, 1989a, p. 16).

This is the most interesting theme, not only by its very nature but also because it is the category on which there is the preponderance of literature regarding feminine writing (e.g., Radway, 1984; Jensen, 1984; Modleski, 1990/1982; Christian-Smith, 1988). Arguably too adult a topic for the 6-12 year-old readers, it is a preoccupation of the 11 and 13 year-old lead characters, who sometimes seem wise well beyond their years.

In The Baby-sitters Club, romance is the operative word; sex is never discussed. It is only known that Mary Anne's father will not allow her to wear revealing clothing nor have her boyfriend in the house when he is not home. (Mary Anne is the only Baby-sitter with a steady boyfriend, Logan). The absence of the discussion of sex is illustrative of the

hegemonic order setting down guidelines, not regarding precise content, but the boundaries within which it has to fall (see Clarke et al. in section 2.8.1). This fact is supported by Ramazanoglu's (1989) commentary, particularly the last sentence:

There is an extensive feminist literature demystifying cultural assumptions about what is normal and natural in sexuality, and showing (in the west at least) that normal sexuality is taken to be masculine sexuality. It is focused on heterosexual, genital sex, in which men are dominant. The expression of women's sexuality has been silenced or rendered abnormal except where it complements male needs (p. 64).

From the books, it seems that romance is the key to stepping out of type-casting--it makes the "mature" Stacey immature; the "individualistic" Dawn insecure; the "shy" Mary Anne bold; the "loudmouth" Kristy shy. It is portrayed as beneficial to the rounding of one's personality; in fact, it leads to contradictions in the character's personality.

In contrast to other romances which have traditionally portrayed relationships between a world-wise older man and an inexperienced younger woman, the successful romances in The Baby-sitters Club are usually between a boy and girl of the same age, a step towards establishing equality in the relationships. There are examples of girls who become infatuated with older boys, but they discover that the boy is either seeking to take over the role of Pygmalion or simply enjoying having a slave at hand. It is a healthy element of the books that the girls generally refuse to be dominated by

their male friends. Even Mary Anne, the "shy", "sensitive" one of the group, breaks up at one point with her steady boyfriend, Logan, because he is beginning to take over her life:

Logan wanted me to be "Logan's girl," and I didn't want to be anybody's girl. Ever. I may not be as independent as my sister, but I have rights and feelings like anyone else.

I did not want to be owned. (Mary Anne vs. Logan; Martin, 1991i, p. 132).

Even when their dreams of romance come to nothing, the girls seek to deal with the situation maturely, emerging with their heads held high. In Dawn and the older boy (Martin, 1990b), Dawn telephones Travis to say goodbye:

"...Besides everything else, you led me on. You let me think I was special to you, but you were seeing Sara at the same time." I felt very calm. "Anyway, I think we should just say goodbye now."

"Say good-bye? Are you serious?"

"Very serious," I said softly. "That's why I called you tonight, Travis. To say goodbye, and to say that I hope you find the perfect girl for you. She's probably out there somewhere, Travis, but I'm not her. Maybe it's Sara."

Travis started to say something, but I didn't give him a chance. I hung up the receiver very gently and stared out of the window for a few minutes.

It was over. And I knew I had done the right thing (p. 126).

Nevertheless, the patriarchal ideology is embedded in the romance theme. All romantic relationships are heterosexual, all child-bearing takes place within marriage. There are no never-married older female role models for the girls.

The fairy-tale persists, and marriage is still the dream. There is, for example, in Dawn's wicked step-sister (Martin,

1990c), the ludicrous image of Dawn, a thirteen year-old, desperately trying to catch her mother's bridal bouquet: the lucky one will, according to tradition, be next to get married (pp. 1-2). Perhaps Dawn has heard the news which Faludi (1991) later exposes as a fallacy:

In the backlash yearbook, two types of women were named most likely to break down: the unmarried and the gainfully employed. According to dozens of news features, advice books, and women's health manuals, single women were suffering from "record" levels of depression...(p. 35).

Faludi (1991), in this excerpt and elsewhere in her book, reveals the powerful "Backlash" against feminism. The Baby-sitters Club is one of the manifestations of that backlash, with its trivialization of feminist issues and its support for traditional values. One of the criteria for a "successful" patriarchy would be to have women safely married and out of the work force. If it were made known that single women were extremely unhappy, women would be greatly desirous of getting married, and even thirteen-year-olds like the character Dawn in The Baby-sitters Club would try desperately to catch bouquets.

Dawn is a particularly interesting case because she is tagged as the "individualistic" one of the Baby-sitters group. Yet, in Dawn and the older boy (Martin, 1990b), when she becomes infatuated with an older boy, she realizes later that she has made a mistake in letting him control her and try to change her into someone that she was not.

Having learnt her first lesson, Dawn again voluntarily makes herself over into someone else in the hope of pleasing a boy in Dawn's big date (Martin, 1992). She relearns the lesson, Be Yourself, but the reader does not know what to expect of her next relationship. This is an example of the series format resulting in a lack of closure which favours the patriarchal ideology, because Dawn, the "individual", has lost credibility as a role model. Taken singly, the lessons in the two books are positive; the fact that the books have the same protagonist/narrator sends a very pessimistic message to young readers with a feminist consciousness--Dawn, "the individual", in dealing with the opposite sex, is the least "individualistic" of all, i.e, she repeatedly changes to please men and does not learn her lesson.

Different protagonists send conflicting messages, tending to dilute whatever feminist message there might be. On one hand, Stacey, the "mature", acts in an irresponsible manner and considers her infatuation with a lifeguard to be a valid excuse:

All morning I watched the lifeguards... I watched them much more than I watched the Pike kids. Mary Anne seemed a bit miffed, but I couldn't help it. I was in love (Boy-crazy Stacey; Martin, 1987a, p. 49).

On the other hand, Kristy, the "immature", although smitten by her softball team's rival coach, still concentrates on the game at hand and is victorious:

If the Krushers won today, would Bart still go to the dance with me? I wondered. I couldn't worry

about that. I put the thought out of my head and whispered to David Michael, who was about to go up to bat, "Bunt it!" (Kristy's mystery admirer; Martin, 1990f, p. 119).

In this respect, Stacey follows the footsteps of traditional romantic heroines; Kristy acts more like a romantic hero. As Rabine (1985) says about Harlequin heroines and heroes:

When these heroines fall in love, they think about love and their lover all the time. The heroes...are emotionally divided between the world of love and the world of business..., and...fragmented in their psychic structure. For them,..., sex is divorced from other feelings, and love from other areas of their life.... whenever he wills it, the hero can simply shut her image off and think about other things (p. 258).

According to Rabine, this is the secret of the hero's worldly success. Now that heroines must also survive in this world, they can only feign the hero's attitude. Rabine (1985) insists:

But the heroine's wholeness, which is also her weakness, means that her outer appearance and actions cannot but reflect her inner emotions. The heroines are transparent where the heroes are opaque (p. 259).

Stacey is transparent in love; Kristy is not. Kristy is fragmented like a hero. For this reason she is, of the Babysitters, the closest to being an oppositional character, at least in the eyes of those who believe the feminist ideal to be a woman who succeeds in a man's mould.

The subsection on gender relations contains contradictory messages--for instance, boy as nuisance and boy as romantic ideal--and contradictions are also present in the rest of the

section. Fiske (1989) explains the need for these contradictions: "...hegemonic power is necessary, or even possible, only because of resistance, so these resources must also carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently within the social system" (p. 2). On one hand, some of the female characters exhibit inspiring assertive behaviour in dealing with men in a romantic situation, e.g., Mary Anne, Kristy. On the other hand, traditional behaviour is exhibited by Stacey and Dawn.

The characters mentioned are not equal in status. The thumbnail sketches of the girls appear in every book, and Mary Anne and Kristy are described as more "babyish" than the other chief Baby-sitters who are "sophisticated" and "individualistic". The hegemonic balance is maintained, as the progressive message becomes compromised by the regard in which the fictional spokesperson is held by the reader⁶. The hegemonic frame is also shown to be intact by the exclusion from the books of gay couples, never-married women, unwanted pregnancy and other groups and details which are in conflict with the essence of capitalist patriarchy.

4.5 Work, Play, Pastimes and Entertainment

This theme is important as an area of ideological struggle between feminists and capitalist patriarchal society. I shall seek to determine whether women's work in The Baby-

sitters Club has moved from the private to the public domain, and whether women's work assumes as much importance as men's. Eisenstein (1979) discusses this in terms of the system of capitalist patriarchy:

Within a capitalist patriarchal economy--where profit, which necessitates a system of political order and control, is the basic priority of the ruling class--the sexual division of labor and society serves a specific purpose. It stabilizes the society through the family while it organizes a realm of work, domestic labor, for which there is no pay (housewives), or limited pay (paid houseworkers), or unequal pay (in the paid labor force) (p. 30).

Eisenstein (1979) points out that women are developing a growing awareness of their oppression, and capitalism's role in that oppression. The housewife realizes that her existence falls within a larger framework. The woman who works outside the home has never resigned from being a mother and a homemaker. She is aware that she is doing two jobs for one salary and is feeling the pressure (p. 35). I shall be looking at the representation of her conflict in The Baby-sitters Club.

Play, pastimes and entertainment are worthy to be examined from a cultural studies standpoint because they constitute part of the so-called "everyday", the "natural". I recall Turner's (1990) words: "The processes that make us--as individuals, as citizens, as members of a particular class, race, or gender--are cultural processes that work precisely because they seem so natural, so unexceptional, so irresistible" (p. 2). In capitalist patriarchy, this is the area where sex roles become ingrained.

Here, contradictory messages also persist. If we look at the business of the Baby-sitters Club, we have the perfect example. The president, Kristy, acted as any enterprising businessman (and I do mean "man") would: she saw a need and filled it by founding the club. From that time on, the girls handled their jobs with supreme efficiency. Yet, the job itself is firmly within woman's traditional sphere. Indeed, the term "baby-sitter" is sometimes used to describe woman in a nurturing role⁷.

The extraordinary independence which the Baby-sitters enjoy in running their Club should give their readers a vicarious thrill and something to which to aspire. The fact that it is a Baby-sitters Club with only one token male is, however, intended to limit the dreams. The message of the capitalist patriarchal ideology is: "Women can be remarkably efficient, but in their own world".

In the books, the employment of the parents of the Baby-sitters is sometimes unclear; however, greater stress is placed on the importance of the father's job. Kristy's stepfather is a millionaire (with an unspecified source of wealth); Kristy's mother has a "terrific" job (of indeterminate nature). Claudia's father is an investment banker; her mother is head librarian of the local public library. Mary Anne's father, a widower until married to Dawn's mother, has his own law firm; Sharon, his wife, works at some undetermined occupation. Stacey's father at one time

headed a company branch in Stamford, Stoneybrook's neighbouring town; her mother, before the divorce, was a housewife. Mallory's father is a corporate lawyer; her mother "temps" once or twice a week. Jessi's father has a good job in Stamford; her mother is in advertising.⁸

The only woman with a precise job title is Claudia's mother, who is holding a typical female job. Greater vagueness surrounds the women's occupations, although the majority of them do work. Women's jobs, as of old, seem to be considered trifling, and their mention appears only a form of patronization, such as is common in a hegemonic structure⁹. In demonstration of a similar type of backlash against women's work, Susan Faludi (1991) reveals the media's support for the trumped-up notion of "cocooning"-- women returning to the home:

The false feminine vision that has been unfurled by contemporary popular culture in the last decade is a sort of vast velveteen curtain that hides women's reality while claiming to be its mirror. It has not made women cocoon or become New Traditionalists...Its false front has encouraged each woman to doubt herself for not matching the image in the mass-produced mirror, instead of doubting the validity of the mirror itself and pressing to discover what its nonreflective side hides (p. 57).

The work in the domestic sphere is also to be considered in connection with the adults. In section 4.3, it was already revealed that Watson and Kristy's mother do an equal share of the housework. Mary Anne's father, Richard, makes breakfast every morning and often finds himself cleaning up after both

breakfast and dinner. He cooks dinner for Mary Anne and himself while Dawn's mother, Sharon, cooks for Dawn and herself. (This is because neither Richard nor Mary Anne enjoys Sharon's vegetarian health-food.) It is Richard who decides when spring-cleaning day is going to be (Dawn's wicked stepsister; Martin, 1990c, pp. 60-65; 141).

For as long as Mimi is alive, she makes it easy for the Kishis to leave home; it is difficult to determine from the books what exactly happens after that in terms of the parents and shared responsibility for the home. When Jessi's mother wants to go back to work, there is a similar solution to Mimi in the shape of Aunt Cecilia:

"Well," Daddy began, and cleared his throat, "your mother will need more than just a sitter. She won't have time to shop or cook or car pool or take care of the house. So...um...so your Aunt Cecilia is going to move in. In a couple of weeks" (Jessi's baby-sitter; Martin, 1990d, p. 7).

Regarding the parents of the remaining two Baby-sitters, Mallory's father takes over his wife's domestic role when she works during his unemployment (section 4.3); there is, however, no reason to expect that this continues in any form after he finds a job. Stacey's parents are divorced.

Although there are many working mothers, it is obvious that the traditional role in the house is still expected of a woman--if not a wife, then a helper like Mimi or Aunt Cecilia. For those men who carry out domestic duties, excuses are given. In the case of Watson, "I guess this comes from being divorced and living alone for awhile before he met Mom"

(Kristy and the snobs; 1988e, Martin, p. 5). Richard is neat and organized while his wife exactly the opposite; therefore, in order to preserve his sanity, he finds himself doing extra chores. Mallory's father only undertakes his wife's duties when she forces him during his unemployment. It cannot be said that sexual equality in labour is strongly advocated in the Baby-sitters Club books. Watson, as the one who is most domesticated, is already beyond the norm in his status as millionaire--he is already a fantasy figure. The trivialization of an oppositional depiction is again present as a characteristic of hegemony.

To a certain extent, education for girls appears to be valued in the series. This is not surprising, considering that the publisher's name is Scholastic Inc. Despite her "cool" flamboyant nature, the fact that Claudia is a poor student is not taken lightly by anyone, not even herself. At the end of Claudia and the Middle School Mystery (Martin, 1991b), there is a celebration because Claudia achieved an A- in mathematics, a subject she hates:

I looked more closely at the writing covering the cake. CONGRATULATIONS, CLAUDIA! it said. What a shock! In our family, it's usually Janine who gets the cakes and has fusses made over her--whenever she wins another prize or award. But this time, the cake was for me.

I looked around the table at the faces of my sister, my mother, and my father. They were proud of me! And, I had to admit it--I was pretty proud of myself (p. 135).

The notion that it is not feminine to be intelligent or successful is not promoted in this book.¹⁰ However, in

contradictory fashion, this monologue is found in Dawn's big date (Martin, 1992):

(I certainly wasn't impressing Lewis with my brains this evening. But maybe that was okay. Boys aren't supposed to like smart girls. That's what I've heard, anyway (p. 110).)

In this book, Dawn absorbs many "facts" from magazines in order to help gain confidence with her date. Although explicitly stated, the above excerpt was probably one of them. Towards the end of the book, Dawn rejects these fashion magazines. However, the "fact" was never firmly connected with them, and the message of the ideology of femininity (as defined by Ryan (1979) in section 3.2) has the possibility of remaining in the reader's memory. There is a definite contradiction in the view on education in The Baby-sitters Club.

This is further supported by the following episode:

"Dawn", she [the teacher] said.
"Name two common forms of igneous rock."

... I opened my mouth to speak, but something stopped me. I didn't feel like being Dawn, Good Student. Cool kids didn't sit up straight and answer all the teachers questions. They slouched and stared into space as if everything were a bore. ... "Heavy metal and pop," I answered, tossing my hair over my shoulder (p. 74).

Dawn receives a reward for her answer in the form of a note from "a very cool girl in my class" (p. 75).

The moral of Dawn's big date (Martin, 1992) is that one should be natural. In her own eyes, Dawn is not "cool"; she tries to be. The definition of "cool" as set out in this

passage has not been erased: "Cool" girls are not good students (Claudia is "cool"). In addition, the ideological message of femininity that women should not be high achievers has already been exposed in section 4.2 with the attitude shown to Ashley and Janine.

There is dialogue in which the Baby-sitters and their young female charges seem to object to sex-role stereotypes. However, the actions of the young charges belie this. When they fantasize, they tend to revert to traditional roles, as in this scene of children's role-playing:

Jessi got the boys settled back in David Michael's bedroom, where there really was a Lego city in progress.

"I'm the architect," David Michael said importantly, "and Andrew is the construction boss. Right, Andrew?"

"Right," Andrew smiled. Construction boss sounded pretty good to him.

Karen took Jessi to her room and began to root through the trunk she kept her dress-up clothes in.

"Hmm," she said, looking Jessi up and down. "Do you want to be a cocktail waitress or do you want to be coming from the society ball?"

"Society ball, of course," Jessi replied. (Dawn on the coast; Martin, 1989c, p. 84).

In The Baby-sitters Club there are also a number of male chauvinists among the young charges, which does not bode well for the feminist struggle in Stoneybrook. Witness this argument between two youngsters, both of them Mallory's siblings:

"No way!" exclaimed Nicky. "Doctors are boys and nurses are girls".

"Oh, that is so old-fashioned," said Vanessa. "there are lots of women doctors today. You know that very well. Doctor Dellencamp is a doctor."

"Well, I am not going to be a boy nurse" replied Nicky. (Dawn's wicked stepsister; Martin, 1990c, p. 52.)

Another similar exchange can be found between Nicky and Vanessa:

"Abbie!" cried Nicky. "You mean a girl was playing football?"

"Girls can play football, too," said Vanessa.

Mr. Katz ignored this (Jessi's wish; Martin, 1991e, p. 46).

In the first exchange, Nicky ignores Vanessa's argument, and states adamantly that he is not going to adopt what he considers a feminine role. In the second exchange, he is shocked that a female has encroached on masculine territory. Vanessa tries to enlighten him, but, noticeably, receives no support from her teacher, Mr. Katz. This is one of the opportunities where there could have been some support for the feminist cause, but, perhaps appropriately, the patriarchal authority figure declines. Let it not be forgotten that Ann M. Martin has also declined.

Nicky is not the only example of a young chauvinist to be found. Buddy, Zack, Rob and Max are some of the others who inhabit the pages of The Baby-sitters Club. A Baby-sitter in charge can do her part to alter these ideas, as Dawn shows here (although she at the same time creates a sexist division by the use of the expression "master chef"):

"Aprons for everybody," I announced, pulling three out of a cupboard.

"Not me," exclaimed Buddy. "Aprons are for girls."

"Aprons are for cooks," I corrected him. "See? Here's a plain white one like the master

chefs wear" (Dawn and the impossible three; Martin, 1987c, pp. 78-79).

The depiction of very young males with firm sexist tendencies holds a very pessimistic message for feminists-- nothing has changed and nothing will change. This is the message of ideology: the present society is ahistorical (see section 2.3). The feminist-minded like little Vanessa do not get the support needed to turn the tide. In Poor Mallory! (Martin, 1990i), Vanessa, fancying herself a poet, plans to sell some of her work to raise money for her family when her father is unemployed. This proves impossible, so she is forced into a traditional female role--"Miss Vanessa", the hairdresser. "This is reality for women" would be the ideological message.

In general, the Baby-sitters would not inspire feminists in terms of their pastimes. The exception is Kristy, who is a softball coach. The others have more traditional "feminine" interests. Claudia loves to experiment with art, make-up, hairstyles and accessories; to read Nancy Drews and to eat "junk food". Stacey also enjoys fashion. Jessi is a promising ballerina, and both she and Mallory like horses and books. Dawn is a health-food fanatic. Others seem to have undeclared pastimes.

However, fashion plays a great part in the characters' definition of themselves and of their friends. Jenkins (1992) notes:

...the stylistic differences of clothing and hair (which are the foundation of the teen advertising industry) become the arenas in which the girls can express their differences in a way that does not threaten group harmony (p. 6).

Many of the labels bestowed upon the girls by their peers stem as much from the extent of their dress sense as from their personality--e.g., Dawn, who dresses with unique flair, is the "individual"; Stacey and Claudia, who have mastered the art of dressing and accessorizing, are the "sophisticated"; Kristy, who does not care what she wears, is the "immature". Here is evidence of the connection between adornment and labels: "And in her double pierced ears were hoops of different sizes. See what I mean about Dawn being an individual?" (Kristy and her Mother's Day surprise; Martin, 1989g, p. 34).

Clothes and appearance also serve as a rite of passage for these eleven and thirteen-year-olds. The entrance to womanhood in The Baby-sitters Club is marked not by a first period, but by a first brassiere. This is not surprising because "the menstrual flow, despite its testament to female fertility and to gender, runs diametrically counter to the prized feminine virtues of neatness, order and a dainty, sweet and clean appearance" (Brownmiller, 1984, p. 194). The substitution of the brassiere as the symbol of entry into puberty is in keeping with the emphasis on commodities by the young girls. (It can also be seen symbolically as voluntary submission to be restricted throughout life.) Capitalist

patriarchy is the system under which we live, and part of women's oppression is in their role as consumers. Eisenstein (1979) states: "They stabilize the economy through their role as consumers. If the other side of production is consumption, the other side of capitalism is patriarchy" (p. 29).

The key to pastimes and interests is choice. The colour pink makes that clear in the series. In Mary Anne saves the day (Martin, 1987e) the protagonist laments:

My room looks like a nursery...It's decorated in pink and white, which my father had just naturally assumed every little girl would like. The truth is, I like yellow and navy blue. Pink is one of my least favourite colors (p. 20).

Elsewhere, Mary Anne complains even more forcefully, "Everything in my room is pink, and I can't stand pink!" (Dawn and the impossible three, 1987c, p. 15).

At first opportunity, Mary Anne effects a transformation in her room. Yet, Nannie, one of the most vital women described in the series, still proudly drives her Pink Clinker. The truth remains that pink is a neutral colour in itself; it is only in the patriarchal code that it becomes "feminine" (cf. Smith, 1990, p. 176). Recall what Radcliffe Edwards (1980) says (in Chapter 3) about "feminine virtues". Radcliffe Edwards was noted as saying that feminine virtues like patience and devotion were quite laudable qualities. They only became problematic when seen as worthy for feminine striving alone, and as an excuse for women's subordination. Similarly, pink conjures up soft femininity, and implicitly

weakness. Therefore, when Mary Anne's father insists on retaining his daughter's room in pink, he is, in effect, insisting that she follows the restricted traditional path of a female. Mary Anne rebels against this in favour of a colour she personally prefers.

I see Nannie's action as a different case--of taking the traditionally feminine colour and embracing it as an act of strength and defiance. Her car could almost qualify as the "trash" of which Brown (1989) writes, if we take "the subordinate" in the excerpt to be women in the dominant patriarchal society. Brown (1989) takes a Fiskian approach:

...in the dominant value system which supports patriarchal discourse, trash is the disparaged way of exploiting the subordinate, of appealing cynically to their vulgar tastes. In the discourse of the subordinate, however, "trash" is used defiantly, the devalued commodity is detached from its devaluation, and used positively in the subordinated culture as a source of meanings and pleasure that are formed partly in the knowledge that they are devalued by the dominant value system (p. 174).

In The Baby-sitters Club, characters make their views known on various forms of entertainment which tend to present a stereotyped view of femininity: e.g., television, fashion magazines and beauty pageants. Again, the total picture is not heartening. In Dawn's big date (Martin, 1992), the title character realizes that she was wrong to try and conduct her budding romantic relationship according to the dictates of a fashion magazine. She makes a joke with her friend and step-

sister, Mary Anne, who emerges as the best bowler out of the group of four, including their boyfriends:

At one point I took Mary Anne aside and whispered, "I read a magazine that says you're not supposed to beat your boyfriend at sports. It damages his ego."

Mary Anne knew I was teasing. "When we go home, let's dig a big hole and dump those magazines into it," she said, smiling (p. 148).

Here is an overt challenge to the authority of the fashion magazine and its construction of femininity.

However, there are other incidences when the Baby-sitters conform to the norm. In Claudia and the genius of Elm Street (1991), Claudia criticises a television commercial for its lack of realism (pp. 1-2). The message of the commercial, essentially, is this: For the housewife, happiness is a clean carpet. However, this is not the aspect of the commercial to which Claudia objects. She finds ridiculous the notion of hungry cartoon gremlins eating the stain. She is not perturbed by the stereotyped portrayals of the mother and daughter in the advertisements. Those are the "natural", the expected. As Barrett (1980/1988) states:

This process of stereotyping is probably the one best-documented...in feminist studies, and the existence of such rigid formulations in many different cultural practices clearly indicates a degree of hard work being put into their maintenance. We could, perhaps, be forgiven for regarding this imagery as "the wish-fulfilment of patriarchy" (p. 108).

If Ann M. Martin had really wanted to promote critical thinking in young girls, to make them aware not only of the choices available but also of the forces like stereotyping

which seek to limit them, this would have been a perfect time to do it. Omission can be as telling a sin as commission.

In an earlier book, Claudia shows herself more aware, but other members of the Baby-sitters Club serve to neutralize her protest. Claudia, ironically the unofficial fashion queen of the Baby-sitters, speaks here:

"I don't know. I think pageants are sexist. I don't care what the article says. People go to pageants and they think that the only thing little girls are good at is dressing up and looking cute. That's ... that's ... it's like... what's that word that sounds like tape deck? Stereo-something." Little Miss Stoneybrook...and Dawn; Martin, 1988f, p. 24).

Her friends, however, sum up the overriding message of this book. Dawn is narrating:

"Would that really be so bad?" I asked. "I mean, I guess a pageant is sexist, but...I don't know..."

"But it could be fun," Kristy finished for me (Little Miss Stoneybrook...and Dawn; Martin, 1988f, p. 25).

Feminist issues are discussed flippantly at best in The Baby-sitters Club. As shall also be apparent in the area of race and class, even in overt discussion of the basic feminist points, the feminist view is trivialized ("sexist...but fun"). This is a telltale sign of hegemonic control: allowing opposing points to be raised, but not presenting them seriously, thus neutralizing them. In this regard, we may also consider women's jobs that are not taken seriously; the trivialization of the oppositional depiction of Watson, spokesperson for sexual equality in labour; the contradictory

approach towards education and the ideological message borne by the sexist youngsters that nothing will ever change.

4.6 Race and Class

Class and race are vital concepts in this discussion of The Baby-sitters Club, especially since a socialist feminist perspective is being adopted. Eisenstein (1979), who has provided the model for socialist feminism, states:

Power--or the converse, oppression--derives from sex, race, and class, and this is manifested through both the material and ideological dimensions of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. Oppression reflects the hierarchical relations of the sexual and racial division of labor and society (p. 23).

In The Baby-sitters Club, primarily the middle-class and upper-middle-class are represented, and they live a life of relative ease and comfort, with little thought for the 31.5 million people who live below the poverty line in the USA (Bureau of the Census, 1991). Jenkins (1992) points out how the difference between the middle-class and the upper-middle-class is handled:

There is the contrast club members see between middle-class and upper-middle-class as exemplified by the wealthy neighborhood where Kristy's new stepfather's nine-bedroom mansion is located, but club members view the rich with mixed envy and pity--envy because the rich can afford backyard swimming pools and pity because when someone does have a backyard swimming pool, it's hard to tell who likes you for yourself and who only likes you for your pool (p. 8).

Of Stoneybrook, Martin has created a sanitized world for her readers, where social evils are non-existent, trivialized,

or reduced to a personal level. The fictional world offered by Ms. Martin's books is so safe that it threatens to make the young readers callous to the plight of the oppressed. She is encouraging a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" mentality.

Some characters in The Baby-sitters Club have experienced hard times, but, through determination, they have persevered. When Mallory's father became unemployed, the whole family, including the children, took measures to economize and to earn extra money; they were rewarded by Mallory's father receiving a new job offer.

Kristy's mother is another excellent example. Her husband left her to raise four children without any support from him. She managed brilliantly, juggling job and household chores. She is rewarded by a second marriage to a millionaire.

It is significant that the perhaps the most political statement in The Baby-sitters Club comes from a homeless person, Judy, in New York (not Stoneybrook), and it is made to look like the ranting of a lunatic. Once more opposition is given voice, but immediately trivialized:

Judy stared at me for a moment. Then she shrieked, "The heads of corporations are liars! Do you hear me?" (They could hear her in Toledo.) "They're corrupting our country with their plastic and their Campbell's soup and..."

Judy's voice trailed after me as I headed for home (Welcome back, Stacey!; Martin, 1989k, p. 111).

Judy presents two faces to Stacey: on certain days, she calls her "Missy" and, according to Stacey, they are "friends. Well, sort of" (Stacey's mistake; Martin, 1987f, p. 6); on other day, Judy behaves as she does above--shouts in a manner incomprehensible to Stacey, and appears not to recognize her. Stacey notes: "When she is in these moods, she doesn't call me Missy. She doesn't call me anything" (p. 6).

It is worth exploring more of Stacey's attitude toward the homeless, and toward Judy in particular, as depicted by Martin (1987f). Stacey clarifies a point, and makes one of those odd couplings so common to The Baby-sitters Club:

Now I bet you're wondering about something. You've heard me mention a roach in my bedroom and a bag lady on my block. Just where in New York do I live? you're probably asking yourself. Well, I live in a very nice neighborhood on the Upper West Side. As I said before, New York roaches live everywhere--and lately so do homeless people (p. 4).

This is a case of confusion of logical types. To place roaches and the homeless casually together in one sentence is to subtly suggest that both groups are pests. Stacey is displaying a very imperious attitude.

Stacey describes Judy's existence. She paints a very bleak picture - sleeping in the streets; eating out of garbage cans; carrying around odds and ends in old shopping bags; sores and reddened skin from exposure to the elements (pp. 4-5). Stacey's summary is: "It is not a nice life" (p. 5). This is a prime example of understatement.

Stacey continues to explain:

I see Judy at least twice a day (when I go back and forth between my nice, comfortable, doorman apartment building and my nice, comfortable private school), and I have an idea of what her life is like. Although I'm sure you can't completely understand homelessness until you've experienced it (p. 5).

It seems likely that the intention here is invoke some sympathy for the homeless and create a modicum of guilt within the more fortunate. However, Stacey appears more eager to establish her own status apart from the homeless: "I live in a very nice neighborhood on the Upper West Side".

Before claiming friendship with Judy, Stacey makes it clear that they could not be more different (p. 5). I consider it significant that Stacey should mention that Judy calls her "Missy" in her good moods, and stress that she does not call her "Missy" in her bad moods. "Missy" is a title of some respect; it is not a title that an equal, e.g., friend, calls another. The title therefore contradicts the claim of friendship made by Stacey.

The unity in difference that this series promotes overtly is in this instance exposed as a sham. Stacey enjoys her superior rank and stands as an example of why women cannot be treated as one; there are women who, by virtue of their race and class, stand as oppressors of others of their sex. As Barrett (1980/1988) states "...the perception of significant differences between women is in itself a challenge to the grand feminist claims of an unshakeable identity as women" (p. vi)

Stacey's community bands together to help Judy. This is a positive move in terms of the story; in terms of the capitalist patriarchal ideology of the books, it keeps the issue of the homeless at the personal or community level rather than as a weakness in the system as such.

The other person who is below middle-class and whose name is featured quite prominently in one book is Mrs. Bruen, the housekeeper working for Dawn's father in California in Dawn on the coast (Martin, 1989c). Dawn meets her:

Breakfast! I threw on my bathrobe and padded down the long, cool, tiled hall to the kitchen. There was Mrs. Bruen, the housekeeper Dad had hired. I'd never met her before, but we introduced ourselves (p. 34).

Noticeably, in this series where people are often defined by their clothes and accessories, Mrs. Bruen's appearance is not considered at all important, not is her mode of greeting. In this book, Mrs. Bruen cleans floors until they are spotless, makes delicious breakfast, packs a wonderful lunch, sets the dining table beautifully for a lovely dinner...but utters not one word. Her sole purpose is obviously to serve; she has no personhood. It is significant that she is one of the few representatives of the working class in the books. There is no doubt that a middle- or upper-middle-class readership is expected.

Since three races are represented in the Baby-sitters Club, the series may appear to be inclusive. The character Claudia is Japanese-American and Jessi is black. They and the

other Baby-sitters are depicted as one big, happy family. This excerpt is an illustration of this. Dawn is speaking to the reader:

I remembered the slumber party they had given me before I left. I pictured Claudia sitting on her sleeping bag, sketching Jessi, whose legs were stretched long, like a real ballerinas. This sounds corny, but the scene was like an advertisement for the U.N. or something. Different kinds of people with different interests, all getting along beautifully. (Okay, getting along most of the time.) (Dawn on the coast; Martin, 1989c, p. 120.

The difference stressed in this passage, however, turns out to be an illusion. Jessi and Claudia act the same as their white friends. Their external appearance may be different; their culture is not.

A closer look will also show that the old hierarchy of the races is preserved in The Baby-sitters Club. Claudia has been in the Baby-sitters Club from its inception, while Jessi does not join until the fifteenth book. Claudia is Vice-president; Jessi is a Junior officer. Claudia holds her post because of her material advantages, i.e., because of her private phone, not because of personal merit; Jessi owes her invitation to the fact that her white friend, Mallory, will not join without her. In other words, the Japanese-American is still being held up as "the superior citizen", the one whose family has managed to come and prosper in America, the one which other minorities, especially blacks, would do well to emulate (Kitano, 1976, p. 204; Ogawa, 1971, p. 56). However, although the Japanese American is given much higher

status than the black, she too must receive acceptance from the whites.

Peter McLaren (1989), a critical pedagogist, draws a picture of the stereotypical Asian and surmises a motive for the depiction:

For some time the dominant culture has portrayed the Asian immigrants as the "model minority"--a homogeneous community that is uncomplaining, hardworking, highly educated, family-oriented, and financially successful....Undoubtedly the dominant culture would like other oppressed minorities to link success to the virtues of self-sacrifice and competitiveness, rather than to struggle politically for the redress of social injustices and institutionalized racism (p. 12).

Claudia's portrayal may not appear to be stereotypical. She is flamboyant and creative, and not a very good student. Yet Claudia's family still manages to create that stereotypical image (cf. Jenkins, 1992, p. 14) against which Claudia is trying to rebel. Claudia's parents want her to eat good food and read good books; like a good American, Claudia wants to eat "junk" and read "junk". She therefore goes into the closet with these items. (It is interesting that, of all the Baby-sitters, Claudia, the Japanese American, is the one that could be oppositionally decoded as an incipient bulimic). Inevitably, Claudia's sister is a "whiz kid", a certifiable genius, and because of that, a virtual social outcast. Even Claudia finds her annoying.

It could therefore be gleaned from the books that truly acculturated Japanese Americans are OK; those who try to reinforce old Japanese ideas and values, e.g., discipline, are

not OK. Japanese children who conform to the "whiz kid" stereotype and humiliate American children are also not OK. The message is: assimilate and we will like you (cf. Jenkins, 1992, p. 13).

Significantly, Claudia's Japanese background is seldom an issue in the books; it is easy to forget except when mentioned in the thumbnail sketches of the Baby-sitters which are contained in every book. The following is part of the first conversation Claudia has in The Baby-sitters Club series, followed by a description of her. The first speaker is Kristy:

"No, honestly, Claud. You don't need makeup. You've got such a beautiful face..."

"Oh, you just think it's exotic," said Claudia.

Well, maybe I do. Claudia's parents are originally from Japan. They came to the United States when they were very young. Claudia has silky, jet-black hair, dark eyes, and creamy skin without so much as a trace of a pimple. She's absolutely gorgeous. But she has this wild streak in her that makes her buy belts made of feathers and wear knee socks with palm trees on them (Kristy's great idea, 1986b, p. 26).

Claudia's retort, "Oh, you just think it's exotic" is significant. "Exotic" may appear to be a compliment--and I think that it can be--but those ethnic groups who hear it often in relation to themselves are constantly reminded of their exclusion, their Otherness.

In the books, Mimi and Claudia have moments drinking Japanese tea and looking at a Japanese haiku in Mimi's room--and Mimi has, on one occasion, worn traditional attire--but

that is the extent to which the Japanese culture intrudes. Even those examples are cheapened by their very presence, like souvenirs on view for a white colonizing eye (cf. Mackey, 1990, p. 486; Jenkins, 1992, p. 26).

Jessi, the token black Baby-sitter, is a character with such a bright future that only a very small percentage of black youth could begin to relate to her. She has a wonderful, supportive, double-parent middle-class family, which makes her privileged indeed, because in 1989, the year after her character appeared, only 38% of American black families had both parents (Bureau of the Census (1991). Jessi is awarded the starring role in ballets. She is therefore not a stereotype of a black-female, such as Bell Hooks (1981) speaks of:

All the myths and stereotypes used to characterize black womanhood have their roots in negative anti-woman mythology...Widespread efforts to continue devaluation of black womanhood make it extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the black female to develop a positive self-concept. For we are daily bombarded by negative images. Indeed, one strong oppressive force has been this negative stereotype and our acceptance of it as a viable role model upon which we can pattern our lives (p. 86).

Instead of being a black stereotype, Jessi is almost too perfect--a fantasy figure rather than a practical role model for most black girls. Her introduction into the series is therefore no great victory for them. In this respect, Jessi is like a "Cosby kid":

...the dominant culture is able to manipulate alternative and oppositional ideologies in such a

way that hegemony can be effectively secured. For instance, The Cosby Show...carries a message that a social avenue now exists in America for blacks to be successful... This positive view of blacks, however, marks the fact that most blacks in the United States exist in a subordinate position...with respect to power and privilege. The dominant culture secures hegemony by transmitting and legitimating ideologies like that in The Cosby Show, which reflect and shape popular resistance to stereotypes, but which in reality do little to challenge the real basis of power...(McLaren, 1989, p. 178).

McLaren's final words in the excerpt could refer to Jessi. Worst of all, Jessi, the black character, is used by her white creator to justify and make light of her race's oppression. Take these two excerpts as examples.

In the first excerpt, Jessi is reacting silently to praise from one of her fellow dancers, who has told her that she was perfect in the starring role. Jessi says to the reader:

There was no way Swanilda could be black, so I wasn't perfect, but I knew I was dancing very well. (Jessi's secret language; Martin, 1988d, p. 132).¹¹

A conscious decision was made by the author to include this statement. One wonders what purpose it could serve except to remind blacks that, no matter how successful they might become, they are intruders in a white preserve and that they should never forget it. There is no encouragement to take pride in one's own cultural diversity.

In the second excerpt, Jessi's aunt is explaining the struggle that black people sometimes (?) have to undergo in

order "to prove themselves". Note the parallel that Jessi draws.

"And I only wanted to show you that I care," Aunt Cecelia said. "I want you girls to grow up to be kind, responsible, neat and polite. You know, it's an awful thing to have to say, but sometimes black people have to work twice as hard to prove themselves. It isn't fair, but that's the way it is--sometimes."

"That's kind of the way it is with Jackie, too," I said thoughtfully. "He's not stupid. He's smart. And he's kind and funny and a lot of other nice things. But he's a klutz, and that's how most people see him. So he has to work twice as hard to prove himself." (Jessi's baby-sitter; Martin, 1990d, p. 126).

What is the message behind this absurd parallel--black people are klutzes, too; so white people are justifiably hesitant to let them take charge of anything? Taking a societal problem and comparing it to a personal flaw is an example of the confusion of logical types, one of many such examples in The Baby-sitters Club, especially related to the black question.

Some other examples of the confusion of logical types follow. In Dawn on the coast (Martin, 1989c, p. 119), the hair colour blond and the skin colour black is seen as being on the same level by Dawn. In Jessi's wish (Martin, 1991e, p. 134), Jessi equates diabetes, racial prejudice, divorce and war as all things unfair. Most curious of all, in Claudia and the bad joke (Martin, 1988a), in discussing the problems with racial prejudice which the Ramseys have suffered on moving into Stoneybrook, Claudia, a member of another minority group, concludes by saying "As my dad would say, though, we all have

our crosses to bear. That means, we all have problems" (p. 10).

The ideological implications for the readers of The Babysitters Club are significant. They are, in effect, being told that race does not matter, and that racism, as a structure, does not exist; one does encounter racial prejudice occasionally but only at a personal level from a few unenlightened people. As Hooks (1990) says:

There would be no need,..., for any unruly radical black folks to raise critical objections to the phenomenon [of ethnicity as discourse] if all this passionate focus on race were not so neatly divorced from a recognition of racism, of the continuing domination of blacks by whites, and (to use some of those out-of-date, uncool terms) of the continued suffering and pain in black life (p. 52).

Jenkins (1992) approaches Hooks' sentiments in the interpretation of the discussion between Aunt Cecelia and Jessi. Unlike me, Jenkins focusses more attention on Aunt Cecelia, whom she sees as a negative black stereotype who dares to raise the issue of racism in a series where it has otherwise been dealt with as just misguided prejudice. According to Jenkins (1992), Aunt Cecelia has thus struck a bad note which will make her unpopular with the readers even after her reconciliation with Jessi (p. 22).

This is the way that Jenkins describes Jessi's reply:

And Jessi, spokesperson for the melting pot generation, responds by making the melting pot equation of racism with personal problems by describing the prejudice one of her (white) babysitting charges suffers from because of his physical clumsiness (Jenkins, 1992, p. 22).

Jenkins sees the parallel that Jessi draws between racism and personal problems. However, she refers to it as a "melting pot equation" rather than as a confusion of logical types which is used to neutralize the realities of black subordination.

Hooks' (1990) comments can aid in evaluating this section:

...just as it has been necessary for black critical thinkers to challenge the idea that black people are inherently oppositional, are born with critical consciousness about domination and the will to resist, white thinkers must question their assumption that the decision to write about race and difference necessarily certifies antiracist behaviour (p. 55).

One should certainly question whether Ann M. Martin's decision to write about difference constitutes anti-snobish, anti-racist behaviour. In her books, the working class people are rarely seen, and then only presented as voiceless or schizophrenic. Any words spoken are interpreted by white middle-class minds.

A similar situation exists in the handling of race. The Japanese-American and the black girls are tokens, drawn from the hands of their white creator, and what they say serves the cause of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. After all, tokenism is, according to Hooks (1990), "a gesture which simply reinforces paternalistic notions of white supremacy" (p. 7). The races that these tokens supposedly represent will see little with which to identify, and less that they would adopt as their own.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The original idea of this thesis was to discover the extent to which The Baby-sitters Club could be considered progressive, according to a socialist feminist viewpoint, or supportive of the hegemonic structure, as envisioned by Gramsci. I began by stating that I had been inspired by Radway's (1984) study. However, I did not share her hopes for women to awaken to the reality of their subordination through the realization of romance reading as symptom of dissatisfaction. I believed that conditioning played a strong role in the reading of romance novels.

Series such as the cultural phenomenon The Baby-sitters Club may lead their young readers to Wildfire teen romances and then on to Harlequins and other adult romances. In reading this chain of books, young females would be consuming patriarchal ideology, likely to further their socialization into traditional femininity. They would also be buying the books, and consumption of that kind is a vital function of capitalism. The interdependence of capitalism and patriarchy is therefore apparent.

With all this in mind, I undertook a textual analysis of The Baby-sitters Club books. Several key concepts came into play during my examination. One was ideology, particularly the Marxian notion that capitalist ideology conceals societal contradictions and supports continued rule by the dominant

class. In effect, it creates the impression that present society is functioning the only way that it possibly could; it does not allow for thought of change. "This is the best of all possible worlds". I see this reflected in the books particularly in the general depiction of the middle-class and upper-middle-class luxury, with only skirting mention given to the working class and to the homeless.

The idea of hegemony was even more important, and it is my contention that this unlocks the door to understanding the text of The Baby-sitters Club. Hall (1980) defines a hegemonic viewpoint as such:

a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy--it appears coterminous with what is "natural", "inevitable", "taken for granted" about the social order (p. 137).

One major characteristic of hegemony is its inclusion of limited opposition so that subordinate groups would think that their interests are being met, when in fact these interests are trivialized and co-opted.

Numerous examples can be found in The Baby-sitters Club: examples related to women's issues in general, and, in particular, to women of racial minorities. The club members are allowed to conduct business as efficiently as any man, but only in a traditional women's area. Almost all the Baby-sitters' mothers work, but only the librarian, in a typical woman's job, has her title revealed. The strong women in the

book, such as Nannie, Mrs. Pike, Mrs. Thomas, are thumbnail sketches in comparison to the sympathetic portrayal of the frail and feminine Mimi. The representatives of oppositional thought in the books would generally be meant to lose credibility with the readers because of some other point about their representation; e.g., Kristy, assertive in love but an immature tomboy; Watson, a male believer in the sexual equality of labour but already a fantasy figure as a millionaire. However, the most striking example of the trivialization of feminist views is the attitude of the club members that a beauty pageant is sexist but enjoyable.

Claudia and Jessi are the token representatives of racial minorities. They appear to be given prominence as lead characters, members in the Club, but neither of them is shown to have entered on their own merits; Claudia was invited on the strength of material possessions and Jessi on the basis of a demand from another prospective member. This marks the hegemonic process in the continuance of a society that is not only capitalist and patriarchal, but racist.

The ideology of capitalist patriarchy, the duality maintained by Eisenstein (see section 3.2), is present in The Baby-sitters Club, particularly the lure to consumption. Readers are encouraged to believe that they can gorge themselves with brand name snacks and still maintain the figure which patriarchal ideology currently insists is ideal - thin. The Baby-sitters define themselves by their clothes

and their accessories, and their passage into puberty is defined not by the first period, but the first bra.

The ideology of femininity, defined by Ryan (see section 3.2) as part of capitalist patriarchy, is also present, and the messages are age-old: High achievers, like Janine and Ashley, are not feminine and therefore will have no friends and, particularly, no boyfriends. Women belong at home, married and minding the children; that is why Kristy's mother feels so guilty in spite of having a good job.

The theory of logical typing, with the elements of contradiction and paradox, was also central to the thesis. They were essential to an understanding of the notions of ideology and hegemony, around which this study was based.

There were many contradictory messages in the books. To give an example, the message in terms of romance seems to be on one hand: "Be yourself and be in control" (e.g., like Kristy); on the other, "This romance is your life; chase and win it whatever the sacrifice to yourself or other people" (as Dawn and Stacey have tried.)

An example of a paradox seemingly resolved by sleight-of-hand narrative closure was "We need Logan in the Club; but if Logan is in the Club, there will be no Club". The Club needed another Baby-sitter, and Logan, a boy, was available. However, after stating earlier that girls could talk to boys just like girls as friends, Mary Anne decided Logan's presence at meetings would disrupt the Club. The issue was superficially

resolved by making him an Associate member (so he would not have to attend meetings). The question why he could not attend receives no satisfactory answer.

The theory of logical typing was particularly useful in examining the treatment of the black question in The Baby-sitters Club. A good example is Jessi's equation of the struggle of black people with the personal problems of a klutz.

The findings of my study were similar to those of Dow (1990; see section 2.8.2) who looked at "Hegemony, feminist criticism and The Mary Tyler Moore Show". She concluded that hegemonic processes were at work to produce mixed messages in a text which might superficially be labelled progressive: "The medium adjusts to social change in a manner that simultaneously contradicts or undercuts a progressive premise" (p. 263).

My textual analysis involved looking at five themes--Female Friendship and Female Rivalry, Family Situations and Older Women, Gender Relations, Sex and Romance, Work, Play, Pastimes and Entertainment, and Race and Class--and each showed that elements of opposition had been included only to expand the width of the hegemonic frame. I would judge the first theme, Female Friendship and Female Rivalry, as the most oppositional, both with its presentation of the solidarity of the Baby-sitters Club, and their compassion with their

defeated rivals. There seems to be a genuine attempt to focus on female empathy.

On the other hand, I would select the fifth theme, Race and Class, as the one which is the least oppositional in presentation. As has been said, the classes which receive the best of the representation are the middle-class and the upper-middle-class. This has long been the portrayal in girls' series, as Mason (1975) can attest. However, the introduction of multi-racial characters is designed to give this series and its clones a claim of new open-mindedness. It is a great disappointment, although not a surprise, to discover that it is only an illusion. Not even in fiction is there equality; the old hierarchy stands. To add to the insult, a highly attractive, highly talented black female character is used to voice acceptance of her race's subordination.

The other themes, Family Situations and Older Women, Gender Relations, Sex and Romance and Work, Play, Pastimes and Entertainment, present a panorama of contradiction, which hints heavily at hegemony. Much material from these themes is already contained above. Equally interesting, however, are the omissions. There are no homosexual relationships; there are no single mothers; there are no never-married older women; there are no incidences of child abuse or physical domestic violence...all these aid in locating the frame. Clarke et al.'s (1981) comments now seem so much clearer: "A hegemonic order prescribes, not the specific content of ideas, but the

limits within which ideas and conflicts move and are resolved" (p. 59-60).

There is a slim chance that The Baby-sitters Club books may be more progressive as they continue to rise in popularity. There may be more even-handed representation. However, the books may also become more conservative, depending on the times. A suggestion for further research would therefore be a monitoring of the series as it develops and changes.

The diversity of characters, situations and messages, along with the openness of the structure, point to the fact that The Baby-sitters Club invites a negotiated, rather than a preferred or oppositional reading, according to the definitions given by Stuart Hall. One way to test the truth of this evaluation would be through an ethnographic study involving young readers of the series. This is another suggestion for further research (see Appendix).

In the end, it must be said that The Baby-sitters Club disappoints. It shows many signs of being modern in outlook, but these signs are only part of a facade, as contradictions, confusions of logical types and general trivialization of feminist and minority issues belie the sympathetic front.

Jensen (1984) concludes about Harlequin: "The romances we get are a product of a literary history, contemporary social changes and the corporate drive for profitability" (p. 164). Likewise, The Baby-sitters Club is more "progressive" than the

girls' series discussed by Mason (1975), since the publishers and writer have bowed to the times by introducing what appear to be oppositional elements. Part of the reason would be to create profit. The system is a capitalist patriarchy. However, omissions from the books suggest that there is a hegemonic frame which marks the boundaries for the storylines of The Baby-sitters Club--one designed to give readers an overly optimistic view of life, to inculcate superficial values and to promote the view that there are no social problems, only personal woes which time and education can heal.

NOTES

1. Note that "oppositional" and all derivatives will be used in this text primarily to mean "counter-hegemonic".
2. I do not presume to summarize Radway's celebrated book in these few paragraphs. To attempt to do so would be to commit a great injustice. I have simply highlighted those aspects which are of interest to my thesis. I have done the same with those noted writers quoted in the section on ideology and hegemony and in the section on socialist feminism.
3. Although Ryan refers to "the women" of Antebellum America, it is almost certain that she means the white women of Antebellum America. This points to the need for greater race awareness among socialist feminists.
4. In this document the APA style will be used; however, there will be a divergence in the case of The Baby-sitters Club books. It has been thought more useful to include the title of these books in citations, therefore from this point such citations will read: (title; author, year, page).
5. The term "beauty myth" is used in the sense elaborated by Naomi Wolf (1991) in her book The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
6. In July 1988, Scholastic Inc. commenced a readers poll, asking for the favourite of the Baby-sitters. More than 27,000 readers replied. The sample may not be representative, but the order in which the Baby-sitters are listed are exactly as I would have expected, given the thumbnail sketches in every book - Stacey, first with over 8,500 votes; Claudia, second with over 7,300; Dawn, with over 4,600 votes; Mary Anne, with over 4,000 votes; and Kristy, with over 2,200 votes. Apparently, the Junior Officers were not considered.
7. On one occasion, in Time's cinema section, women in summer movies were categorized as "babe" (the voluptuous female), "butch" (a female version of the Terminator) or "baby-sitter" (the caring nurse) (Corliss, 1991, August 5, pp. 48-49).

8. The only two males for whom a precise position in employment is not stated are Watson, the millionaire, and Jessi's father, a black man. It could be that to state Watson's employment would be to establish him explicitly as capitalist; to state Jessi's father's job would either leave the writer open to criticism of being unrealistic, if the job title were too high, or of following the usual stereotypical portrayals, if the job status were too lowly.
9. I have been investigating the jobs of the parents of the Babysitters. It is, however, worthwhile to note that the father of Charlotte Johanssen, a regular baby-sitting charge, is an engineer; her mother is a doctor. This could be cited as an example of tokenism or of the exception which proves the rule.
10. The outcome of the battle between Mary Anne and Cokie as summarized in section 4.2 is also proof of the value given education in these books.
11. Taken out of context, this might appear as just light self-mockery on Jessi's part. However, the foundation had been already laid in the same book, e.g., on p. 26, when Jessi says to herself. "There probably weren't any black people in European towns hundreds of years ago anyway. How could I have thought I'd get a role in Coppelia?"

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APPENDIX

PILOT FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

OF BABY-SITTERS CLUB

READERS

I have already laid some of the groundwork for an ethnographic study by conducting a pilot study with two knowledgeable eleven-year-old readers of The Baby-sitters Club. The pilot study took place in the bedroom of a young fan of The Baby-sitters Club, and this proved to be an ideal setting, one of unintimidating intimacy.

The Baby-sitters Club books were put in clear view and within easy reach, and there were also many other children's books on display on the shelves in the room. The two female participants were given refreshments and encouraged to act as much as possible as if they were having one of their usual chats. They chose their own seats on the floor, while I was perched on the bed. All of these measures were meant to create as natural an atmosphere as possible, and, for the most part, they were very successful.

Particularly pleasing was the uninhibited frankness displayed by the participants in talking with each other and with me. Their perspective was very interesting, but strengthened me in the belief that young girls, such as would

read The Baby-sitters Club, are capable, at most, of negotiated decoding.

Some of the more interesting findings of the pilot study include:

- *** Although the girls were the same age as the Junior Officers of the Baby-sitters Club, they did not like these characters at all. They were not seen to be interesting like the older Baby-sitters. This would suggest that the girls are aspirational --like Mallory, they want to be older and a part of all that ideologically entails.
- *** The girls had no trouble in deciding which character they wished to be like--Dawn, the "individualist". This admiration of Dawn seemed to stem mainly from the brief portraits of her at the front of each book and from the clothes that she was described as wearing on various occasions. Unlike me, they did not seem to see any contradictions in her portrayal.
- *** Although the girls selected the black and the Japanese-American as the characters with whom they least identified, they placed the difference in race well down on the list of reasons. They also were both careful to state that this was not of importance--echoing the sentiments overtly expressed in the books.

- *** The girls had thought about what the Baby-sitters would be like when they grew up--mostly in terms of who would marry whom. What the girls wanted to happen next in the series was for Ann M. Martin to portray the Baby-sitters at a later stage in their lives--e.g., in college. This supports the idea of a chain, as girls are conditioned to graduate to higher-level romances.
- *** The Baby-sitters did not remind the girls of anyone they knew. They were of the opinion that the characters acted much too old for their age--the eleven-year-olds acted like fifteen; the thirteen-year-olds like twenty. This realization of a lack of reality by readers would lead one to believe that they are knowingly retreating into fantasy to escape the restrictions of their own life. The Baby-sitters have a certain autonomy which the girls do not possess.
- *** The boy-girl relationships in The Baby-sitters Club also seemed highly unrealistic to the pilot participants, except where Alan Gray was the boy in question. Indeed, Alan Gray was considered the most realistic character in the books--boy as nuisance. This proves that the romance sections of the books, rather than reflecting reality, are imparting patriarchal ideology to youngsters who

cannot tell from their own experience whether they are reading the truth or not. They only know that they are not reading their truth.

*** The girls are particularly interested in the practical information to be found in The Baby-sitters Club--e.g. the baby-sitting tips and the meeting procedure. This was a surprise to me, since I was so engrossed in the ideological aspects of the series. There seems, here, to be some support for Fiske's claim that there are multiple readings of a text--readings which would escape a critical analyst.

These notes should persuade that there is potential here for a fascinating study. Children provide a vastly different perspective to adult critics; they shame and perplex us with their intellectual honesty. When a genuine understanding is gained of their world and their thoughts, then there may be hope of communicating with them toward a new critical consciousness. Discussing their books--like The Baby-sitters Club series--with them may become part of the process of understanding and resisting hegemonic rule.

VITA AUCTORIS

Kim Anne-Marie Thorpe was born on September 23, 1962 in Bridgetown, Barbados. After completing her secondary education at Queen's College in her homeland, she entered McGill University in Montreal, Canada, in Fall 1981. She graduated in Spring 1985 as a University Scholar with a First Class Joint Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in German and Spanish.

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